

The State of Ecotourism Development in the Maltese Archipelago

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Abstract

Whereas tourism in the Maltese Islands has been characterised by mass tourism, there has been a drive to promote a number of niches case in point ecotourism. Fifteen years have passed since the formal attempt to kick-start ecotourism in the Maltese Islands. In the light of this milestone, interviews with a wide range of stakeholders and analysis of tourism policies were conducted to investigate the development of the niche within the archipelago. Whereas continuous efforts have been recorded confirming development of the niche, other existent challenges that hinder ecotourism development have been outlined by stakeholders.

Introduction

Located in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, the Maltese Archipelago consists of three main islands Malta, Gozo and Comino and other uninhabited islands (Schembri, 1993). With a population of over 434,000 inhabitants (NSO, 2016), Malta is one of the most densely populated states. This coupled with its small dimension has led to intense environmental pressures especially along the foreshore where most touristic development has taken place (Boissevain, 2004).

Tourism is a major economic industry on the archipelago (Cassar *et al.*, 2008). Despite almost two million tourists visiting the Maltese Islands by plane or by cruise ship by the end of 2016, leaving considerable economic returns in the archipelago (NSO, 2017) and with trends foreseeing further growth in tourist arrivals (OECD, 2016), concerns have been raised on the sustainability and impacts of this industry (Bramwell, 2003). Whereas mainstream mass tourism has dominated the national tourism scene (Dodds, 2007) with sandy beaches being heavily sought after by tourists (Deidun *et al.*, 2003), over the years, a number of touristic niches have developed in the Maltese Islands (MTA, 2016). These niches are generally seen as an ideal alternative to mass tourism due to the environment and socio-economic benefits that such responsible activity may bring. One such niche is that of ecotourism (in its various forms including coastal and marine ecotourism) based on three principles: nature-based, environmental, social/cultural and financial sustainability and the interpretation element (Weaver and Lawton, 2007). It encompasses a myriad of activities including nature photography, visiting cultural and heritage sites, cycling, snorkelling, scuba diving, kayaking, canoeing, bird watching (Sakellariadou, 2014), rock pooling, walking on coastal footpaths and observing marine mega-fauna such as whales and dolphins (Garrod and Wilson, 2003).

One wouldn't be too presumptuous to say that coastal and marine ecotourism was one of the initial excursions when tourism started to develop in Malta. A major initial tourism activity revolved around boat tours to coastal cliffs and caves to the so called 'Blue Grotto', an excursion which has nowadays become a top listing (number 30 of 356) of things to do in Malta on Trip Advisor (Trip Advisor, 2017). Evidently the natural environment of the Maltese Islands, had at least in the past, a lot to offer and was a major attraction in the beginning of tourism in Malta.

Kick-starting ecotourism in Malta

The United Nations (UN) declared 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE) (UNEP/WTO, 2002). The Government of Malta decided to participate wholeheartedly in the initiative. Ahead of the IYE a co-ordinating committee was set up by the Ministry for Tourism in Malta to decide on the activities to be undertaken throughout the year. Following this, an inter-ministerial committee was set up to implement a programme of activities (DOI, 2001; UNWTO, 2017) with the aim of making the Maltese countryside more attractive, conserving and maintaining cultural assets, strengthen law enforcement and raising more awareness. Activities and initiatives included the clearing of seabed from debris, the removal of metal drums and abandoned vehicles from fields, removal of weeds from the bastions, school visits to historical places, distribution of informative material to school children on the World

Day for the Environment, featuring a monthly article on ecotourism sites in Malta on Air Malta's Inflight magazine and tree plantations by families (Times of Malta, 2002). Malta also participated in the World Ecotourism Summit (DOI, 2002). Furthermore the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) launched the national ecolabel focusing on sustainability of accommodation structures (Magri, 2015). Moreover the countryside walks project was also launched in 2002. Eight countryside walks were developed, four in Malta and four in Gozo several of which encompassed both coastal and inland areas. A series of publications serving as guidebooks for such countryside walks were published by governmental entities. (MTA, 2005). MTA also supported other complimentary initiatives taken by eNGOs such the publication of ecological guidebooks (Camilleri *et al.*, 2003). As part of the IYE initiatives, a survey was also carried out to map and determine the extent and the status of the marine habitat type dominated by *Posidonia oceanica* meadows which effort eventually led to the establishment of the first Marine Protected Area (MPA) in the Maltese Islands (Government of Malta, 2004).

Fifteen years have passed since the UN declared 2002 as the IYE, which as pointed above saw a formal attempt to kick-start the development of the niche in the Maltese Islands; yet, questions remain on the potential of the niche to thrive in the archipelago and on concrete initiatives taken in the sector. It is thus apt to evaluate the development of ecotourism in the Maltese Islands over the past years and to identify challenges hindering its development.

Methods

Analysis of the national tourism policies published over the past fifteen years was conducted to evaluate the development of the ecotourism niche in the Maltese Islands. Furthermore, seventy-nine in-depth interviews were held between July 2015 and August 2016 with various stakeholders to obtain a wide understanding on the development, and current state of the niche. Challenges hindering further development were also identified. As per Holden (2008) and Orams (1999) stakeholders consulted included academics with an interest in the respective fields, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with a remit related to the natural and cultural environment, governmental entities and policy makers, affected locals (including inhabitants and land owners) and resources users (including operators and tourists). The two sub types (expert and snowball sampling) of the strategic informant sampling technique (a non-probability sampling technique) were then used to recruit interviewees (Finn *et al.*, 2000).

Interviews were held face to face and lasted between thirty to sixty minutes. In two cases two persons were present for the interview. Interviews were kept semi-structured to allow one to delve more into the subject through supplementary questions (Veal, 2006). A checklist of topics was used to ensure that relevant topics are covered (Wearing *et al.*, 2002). Issues tackled included policy development, management of ecotourism sites (notably marine and terrestrial protected areas) and enforcement. Rather than audio recording the interviews, notes were taken during and after the interviews to ensure anonymity of respondents and not to deter their participation. A summary note was prepared following each interview. As in the case of most qualitative ecotourism research, data collected was analysed manually through coding, sorting and

by looking for dominant themes (Backman and Morais, 2001). An open coding approach as suggested by Beck and Manuel (2008) was employed to ensure that due attention was given not only to expected but also to other emerging themes. Eventually the content was summarised omitting repetitive information.

Results

Ecotourism policy and planning

Whereas ecotourism policy has been considered to be limited (Agius, 2011), over the years there has been an evident increase in the attention given to ecotourism and related aspects in terms of tourism policy. The attempt of the Government of Malta to push forward ecotourism is said to be a reaction to the significant impact of conventional tourism on the environment (Tesch, 2014) especially in a scenario where the environment has been identified as a key element of the Maltese Islands tourism product (MiTC, 2007). The niche seems to have gained further attention in recent years reflecting new trends in travel across Europe. The term ecotourism per se has been referred to in the 2002, 2012 and the 2015 national tourism policy documents and in the EcoGozo action plan. At times ecotourism is referred to indirectly through other ecotourism related activities which are at times considered as separate niches including diving and trekking but recent policies also differentiate ecotourism from agritourism, rural tourism and adventure tourism. Ample reference has been made to ecotourism with respect to Gozo which is considered to be a distinct ecodestination (MTCE, 2012; MT, 2015). A separate rural tourism policy to present the holistic potential of a number of related niches including ecotourism has also been proposed (MTCE, 2012). It has also been acknowledged that studies on its potential in Gozo are also limited (MGOZ, 2012). Stakeholders feel that even if policy has made reference to ecotourism and plans for its development have been made, there has been a lot of talk and little action. Whereas through the IYE interest in the niche has augmented, according to NGOs the IYE initiative was just a political stunt. Others argued that it is futile for policy to give due attention to the niche unless there is adequate interest in the niche from relevant stakeholders including operators.

Furthermore, policies tend to be short-termed with a lifespan of maximum five years reflecting the mandate of a government, an issue which has also been outlined by Dodds (2007). This implies that there is lack of continuity especially when there is a change in administration. Changes in administration can also lead to change in priorities. In 2013 a change in government led to a situation whereby the Ministry for Tourism, Culture and the Environment which was pushing forward ecotourism was split. The policy of EcoGozo which featured several aspects directly related to ecotourism was also put on the back burner. Yet this does not mean that ecotourism was completely side-lined.

Sustainability: the wider perspective

Both the policy documents and stakeholders have outlined the need to obtain sustainability not just in terms of tourism but also within other aspects which are related to it. The 2002 tourism policy document speaks about the need to encourage

environmentally-friendly practices, the 2007 tourism policy outlines the need of achieving sustainability and the 2012 policy argues that sustainability in tourism should be obtained in a holistic manner across various aspects including transport, accommodation, catering facilities, attractions and by encouraging key players such as retailers to do their part as these were issues that all have a say to attract the ecotourists to the Maltese archipelago, something that has also been reiterated by stakeholders.

The issue of implementing a carrying capacity was often raised by stakeholders as they feel that there is a constant aim to increase the number of tourists ignoring the issue sustainability. The need to translate into action the carrying capacity studies conducted has already been emphasised (Dodds, 2007; MiTC, 2007). This issue is also relevant for the island of Comino - a Natura 2000 site which is heavily impacted by mass tourism and in fact studies on the matter have been commissioned (ERA, 2017).

Lack of cooperation and incompatibility with policies

Whereas it has been acknowledged that the work of different Ministries, including those related to the environment and Gozo, impact tourism and ecotourism (MiTC, 2007), stakeholders have expressed concern that little progress has been recorded in terms of cooperation and the effectiveness of inter-ministerial committees has been questioned. The need for different departments within MTA to communicate better and for MTA to coordinate better with other governmental entities such as entities responsible for environmental enforcement has long been acknowledged (Dodds, 2007; MTA, 2002). For instance NGOs, local government and different Ministries fail to liaise with each other when it comes to overlapping projects such as development of country side walks.

According to stakeholders the lack of cooperation between different entities at times leads to incompatibility between policies. Such argument is also raised by Lockhart (2002:213) who argues that the incompatibility between policies that aim to attract higher quality tourism and the realities of the islands such as the aim to increase tourist arrivals explains why "*Malta is not and cannot become an ecotourism destination*". On the other hand in a rare scenario the amalgamation of the Tourism and the Environment Ministry in 2008 led to an attempt to complement policies in both areas so as to contribute towards each other (MTCE, 2012).

Bureaucracy and regulation

Whereas tourism policy has outlined the need to reduce bureaucracy (MiTC, 2007) stakeholders have noticed little change since then and have argued that bureaucracy disheartens investment in such a small niche. Furthermore one could not have a one size fits all regulation mechanism whereby regulation for mass tourism applies to small niches such as ecotourism in terms of licensing for excursions and guiding. Yet authorities have argued that regulation and enforcement is required to safeguard the interest of consumers and the niche. Operators that do not have relevant licenses or do not abide to existing regulation may jeopardise safety of ecotourists (if they lack an insurance policy) or fail to provide a high quality experience (if they lack a licence to operate an excursion and/or offer guiding services).

Ecotourism as a tool to strengthen the tourism sector in Malta

All policy documents published between 2002 and 2015 outline how particular niche markets including diving, walking tours and ecotourism can be practiced in the off peak season and that with the right planning and incentives, such niches can grow to attract the relevant market segment thus reducing seasonality and widen the length of stay of tourists on both islands apart from serving as an alternative to mass tourism (MTA, 2002; MiTC, 2007; MTCE, 2012; MT, 2015). Policies have also identified ecotourism as a possible instrument to complement the general tourism product by offering a diversified tourism experience in the Maltese Islands (Parlato Trigona, 2014).

Endemicity and wildlife as an ecotourism attraction

Whereas policy documents rarely refer to wildlife save for underwater wildlife, the 2007 policy document argues that beyond conservation, endemic flora and fauna have the potential to serve as a tourism attraction and that conservation could also be obtained by raising awareness of the visitor. Whereas some academics have argued that the Maltese Islands have an impoverished fauna, stakeholders have argued that even if the archipelago can't boast of big charismatic species, one still finds a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna including several endemic species found solely on the archipelago which can serve as an attraction for the ecotourists visiting the archipelago (Sciberras, 2008).

Marine resources

Although reference to marine life and environment received attention in early tourism policy documents due to diving, the 2007 and 2012 policy documents refer to richness of the seabed of the Maltese archipelago and acknowledge the need to protect the marine environment through the introduction of blue flag beaches, clamping down spear-fishing, elimination of sewage outflows, relocation of fish farms and introduction of MPAs as sites to practice tourism. Whereas most of such measures have been implemented and even if the number of MPAs increased over the years, stakeholders argued that management has remained scant. Both policies also refer to the need to offer relevant interpretation for such resources to serve as an added value for tourists (MiTC, 2007; MTCE, 2012) something which is currently quite lacking.

Sites for ecotourism: management and accessibility

The 2007 policy document differentiates between urban and rural areas on the basis of population density and outside development zone (ODZ) terrain. The rural areas include northern, western and south eastern Malta along with Gozo and Comino, areas that coincide with those earmarked by stakeholders as ideal sites where one can practice ecotourism. In fact stakeholders argued that whereas the Maltese Islands are limited in size one still finds various locations (both terrestrial and marine) including protected areas (e.g. Natura 2000 sites) with a large potential for ecotourism. The 2007 and 2012 Policy documents also refer to coastal and protected areas and their potential for tourism.

Whereas the 2012 policy document also emphasises on the need to prepare management plans for MPAs and Natura 200 sites to provide adequate protection and management, and even if some of these plans have been completed, stakeholders have argued that the same sites are generally bereft of any effective management and implementation frameworks, mainly due to a lack of financial and human resources and as a result end up being paper parks. At times this is also the result of fragmentation in terms of management and the absence of competent structures leading to lack of standards. Also relevant is the fact that effective enforcement is generally lacking at these sites due to the lack of political willingness to adopt bold decisions in this regard an issue also raised by Dodds (2007). The need of proper enforcement in such areas has been acknowledged (MiTC, 2007). Stakeholders have also argued that the potential of such sites is at times overlooked and development due to conventional tourism supersedes the option to extend dimension of such protected areas.

The 2007 tourism policy clearly outlines a major problem for those interested in countryside walks due to limited accessibility of the countryside and the need to remove illegalities including structures placed by squatters which block and/or restrict pathways as this may lead to environmental impacts and conflicts with the local community including farmers. The issue has also been constantly brought up by stakeholders during interviews who argued that due to illegalities of squatters, hunters and trappers even indicative pathways on publications had been shunned from wild areas to tarmac paved pathways. Such issues need to be tackled also in the light of the fact that extension of such walks including some along the coast have been proposed (MiTC, 2007; MGOZ, 2012).

Gozo - an ecodestination

The unique characteristics such as the open countryside, unspoilt nature and the scenic coastline and underwater have been earmarked as the major strengths of the Gozo touristic product (MTA, 2002; MiTC, 2007). In fact more recently emphasis in ecotourism plans and various tourism policies has been made on the need to preserve the environment and market the island as an ecoisland on the basis of its natural and pristine characteristics. Some have argued that Gozo has for the past years been branded as an ecoisland but this was not out of policy but more of a personal initiative of some officials. Yet MTA documents proof that branding Gozo as an ecoisland has been at least on paper since 2001 (MTA, 2001). Nevertheless other policy makers have argued that recent initiatives to promote Gozo as an ecodestination such as Ecogozo were merely a green washing exercise.

The need for tourism in Gozo to shift from conventional tourism to ecotourism has been also considered to be a 'natural vocation' even if it is currently 'under explored' possibly due to the fact that little information is provided on the matter by the tourism industry in Gozo. Meanwhile the 2012 policy document hints that ecotourism is more relevant to Gozo than Malta (MTCE, 2012; MGOZ, 2012).

Environmental issues

Various tourism policies have referred to the need to preserve the environment due to its important role in the tourism product. Among the issues raised by stakeholders one finds hunting and trapping, pollution of seawater due to aquaculture,

pollution of fresh water due to agriculture, fly tipping and illegal dumping most of which identified by the 2007 tourism policy as a major concern for tourists. Illegal development and proposals for megaprojects in coastal environments including air/seaports and hotels also seems to be a worrying factor for stakeholders. Stakeholders have argued that law enforcement is lacking and protection of the environment is only on paper. Various policy documents have also remarked on the need to need to strictly enforce environmental legislation (MTA, 2002) as the environment is an important element of the tourism product. It has also been argued that tourism projects should not jeopardise this resource (MiTC, 2007). Stakeholders also argued that enforcement is also needed with respect to ecotourism excursions as these may leave an impact on wildlife such as in the case of close encounters.

Incentivising the niche

Stakeholders have emphasised on the need to incentivise more operators to develop or work in the niche through financial means and by implementing less stringent regulation. To date few operators are working in this field. In most cases operators have developed in response to an environmental cause (e.g. to save the area known as Ta'Ċenċ in Gozo or to safeguard an area which was earmarked to be developed into a golf course). The vacuum has also been filled in by eNGOs but this has created rifts with operators who regard them as unfair competition as they are exempt from legal requirements of companies even if this is not always the case and even if they too face the same regime of regulations. This issue is also confirmed by Lew (2011) who argues that few operators are taking advantage of the natural landscapes found on the islands to offer ecotourism excursions.

Continuity

There have been elements of continuity in terms of ecotourism policy and initiatives. The ecolabel managed by the MTA introduced in 2002 has since then been further developed through reviews conducted in 2008 and 2012 to focus on sustainability criteria and is to date still operational. Today the ecolabel has also been extended to accommodation structures other than hotels such as farmhouses in Gozo (Magri, 2015). The series of articles on ecotourism published on the inflight magazine of the national airline, AirMalta in 2002 were discontinued but one still finds regular articles on ecotourism excursions and ideal venues to practice such excursions in this magazine thus also promoting the green aspect of the archipelago to inbound tourists. The countryside walks developed were unfortunately not maintained over the years and abandoned. Yet the concept was overhauled recently through the Malta goes rural project. The walks were amended, relevant infrastructure including directional signage, information signage and resting areas were installed. The relevant guidebooks were also updated and published in various languages. The Ministry for Gozo has also revamped the walks in Gozo and published new guidebooks. There has also been recent policy initiatives such as conferences organised on the way forward for ecotourism both in Malta and Gozo (Brimcat, 2015; MGOZ, 2015). Other international academic conferences which also focused on ecotourism have also been organised in the Maltese Islands (Micallef *et al.*, 2006). Malta also participated in the Mediterranean Experience of Eco-Tourism (MEET) project helping a specific park to develop an ecotourism package.

Ecotourism in Malta: the situation today

Whereas the archipelago is considered as an atypical ecotourism destination (Parlato Trigona, 2002) and even if ecotourism makes a minute part of the local tourism industry it has a lot to offer to nature lovers and is filled with several attractions both on land and especially in sea making it easy for one to create a diverse nature-themed itinerary. In terms of activities one can engage in trekking, rock climbing, diving, bird watching, nature photography, cycling, volunteerism in coastal and marine conservation areas, kayaking, agritourism experiences, visiting cultural heritage sites and horse riding. At times emphasis has been made that certain activities, case in point diving and trekking, can be better practiced in Gozo rather than in Malta. Both stakeholders and policy documents have pointed out on the need to improve synchrony between ecotourism and overlapping niches to satisfy expectations of ecotourists such as in the case of diving, an ecotourism activity which is currently being marketed mostly as a sports activity (Lew, 2011; MGOZ, 2012). One can travel green by sailing, walking or using public transport; sleep green by using an accommodation that holds the local ecolabel; and eat green by consuming local organic products (Lew, 2011). Stakeholders pointed out that whereas various activities and excursions are possible, and even if various green services are available, the absence of packages obscures the potential of the niche in the archipelago.

Conclusions

Since the IYE, Malta has gone a long way to promote ecotourism with the niche gaining more ground in national tourism policy documents especially in areas focusing on the island of Gozo. Most initiatives taken in 2002 have also been further developed and strengthened. Whereas both policy documents and stakeholders have identified a number of challenges, a number of initiatives have been taken by both governmental entities, NGOs and the private sector giving one the option to practice ecotourism in the Maltese islands. One concludes that given the right incentives, there is still room for such niche to develop further within the archipelago owing to the natural terrestrial and marine resources which even if heavily fragmented are still of interest to ecotourists.

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