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Landscape management in the Maltese Islands: the state of implementation of the European Landscape Convention

Louis F. Cassar and Elisabeth Conrad

Landscapes of the Maltese Islands

The Maltese archipelago is located in the central Mediterranean Sea, midway between the European and north African shores. The Islands have a total land area of only 316 km², but a substantial human population of 405, 611 (National Statistics Office, 2007) inhabitants is superimposed on this physical canvas. The country's present-day



Louis Cassar (centre), Richard Partington (left), Elisabeth Conrad

landscapes are a product of many factors, both natural and anthropogenic. Geo-tectonic processes in the Mediterranean Basin over time have shaped the geomorphological expression of Maltese landscapes, and influenced the biotopes and associated ecological diversity which the Islands harbour. However,

indisputably the biggest agent shaping Maltese landscapes has been the human species. Malta has a long history of human habitation, dating back some 7500 years. The long and varied history of human habitation is of great relevance in discussing Maltese landscapes. The present-day ecological assemblages which are present, for example, are a direct result of human-related trends. The widespread need for firewood in past centuries led to widespread and extensive deforestation; as a result, there are no forests *per se* in the Maltese Islands today. Similarly, the introduction of the goat led to widespread grazing, and to alteration of floral assemblages. The introduction of alien species likewise led to landscape-scale visual changes that persist to this day.

Landscape changes in Malta have been particularly marked since the latter half of the twentieth century. During this period, Malta experienced rapid economic growth, and in the absence of adequate spatial planning and environmental legislation this led to widespread insensitive urban development and degradation of the countryside (Cassar *et al.*, in press). The first planning and environmental management instruments only came into effect in the early 1990s. Today, population density on the Maltese Islands is highest amongst all European Union member states (at 1,274 inhabitants/km², compared to an EU average of 113 inhabitants/km²). In addition, there is the substantial pressure of an additional tourist population. The most marked net result has been extensive urbanization, with an urban footprint of circa 23% (compared to an EU average of 8%). Furthermore, rapid and unplanned growth has resulted in several environmental problems ranging from pollution and exhaustion of groundwater resources, to poor air quality (with resultant public health impacts), to widespread habitat destruction. The Maltese landscape is therefore a

resource with two facets. On the one hand, it is a unique product of nature, history and culture, both distinctive and irreplaceable, and upon which depends one of the country's main income generators, namely tourism. On the other hand, it is a resource under threat from forces of urban growth and globalization which may prove impossible to curb.

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State of implementation of the European Landscape Convention in Malta

Malta was one of the original group of signatory states to the European Landscape Convention in 2000, but is one of only two members of this group to have not yet ratified the Convention. The following discussion evaluates the current situation in the light of the Convention requirements. There are two points on which Malta's implementation to date



Elisabeth Conrad, Birgitta Elfstrom in background

appears to fare rather weakly. One is the definition of landscape as "an area, as perceived by people". This

definition has been fully acknowledged in the *Landscape Assessment Study of the Maltese Islands*, which was issued in 2004. However the extent to which the perceptual element has been integrated into landscape planning appears to be limited. Landscape character areas were defined on the basis of topography, predominant landscape elements, and zones of visual influence. The stakeholder component was limited to consultation concerning a derived *Landscape Assessment Model* outlining landscape sensitivity in the Maltese Islands. There is a relatively weak history of public participation in decision-making.

The second point on which Malta fares weakly is that of scope The eight Local Plans which have been issued address both outstanding and ordinary landscape areas through a variety of measures, including locality-specific and site-specific policies, provisions for embellishment, guidelines for development, and designation of protective measures. There is, however, certainly scope for expanding consideration of degraded areas to include rehabilitation and possibly ecological restoration. At present, such measures are largely limited to disused quarry sites. Overall, however, Malta appears to have made significant progress in terms of implementing the requirement to integrate landscape into regional and town planning policies, and in cultural, environmental, agricultural, social, economic and other policies.

Chapter II of the Convention outlines national implementation. It also discusses division of responsibilities. In Malta, there are two levels of government administration, namely national government and 67 local councils. Given Malta's limited land area, landscape planning has been implemented at a national scale whilst local initiatives have been limited to small-scale sites. which nevertheless can also cumulatively

contribute to the enhancement of broader-scale landscapes. In terms of general measures, Malta appears to satisfy, to some degree, the requirement to recognize landscapes in law.

Participation in landscape policy measures in Malta has been limited to essentially two events:

- ◇ The involvement of 300 stakeholders in order to validate a landscape assessment model developed in 2004; and
- ◇ A public consultation exercise relating to the issue of the *Landscape Assessment Study of the Maltese Islands*.

There are presently no mechanisms for the ongoing involvement of stakeholders in decision-making where landscape is concerned. Involvement of stakeholders is largely limited to other planning processes which indirectly impact upon landscapes.

A general perception of landscape as a resource and as heritage is still largely lacking. Training for students and professionals is also inadequate and landscape is a peripheral, rather than central, concern in education. A landscape characterization exercise was carried out as part of the *Landscape Assessment Study of the Maltese Islands*, and this also included an extensive analysis of pressures and trends. However, there is a critical shortcoming in implementation to date, namely the inadequate consideration of social and cultural dimensions. The ELC notes the assessment of landscapes should take "*into account the particular values assigned to them by interested parties and the population concerned*". It is doubtful whether this is indeed the case with regard to the *Landscape Assessment Study*.

Article 6E of the ELC discusses the need to introduce instruments aimed at protecting, managing and/or planning the landscape. To date, the predominant mechanism utilized

in Malta is scheduling of land under the Development Planning Act, 1992, particularly as Areas of High Landscape Value. Several Areas of High Landscape Value have been identified at regional levels through the Local Plans. Within scheduled areas, land-uses and activities are restricted; however, these areas are not actively managed. At the level of the individual development, landscape assessment has been increasingly utilized as a tool in Environmental Impact Assessment. Initially, the focus of such assessments tended to be almost exclusively visual, but the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, is now emphasizing the need for an assessment of visual *and* non-visual aspects of landscape.

Chapter III of the ELC discusses European co-operation, addressing points such as international policies and programmes, mutual assistance and exchange of information and transfrontier landscapes. The provisions of Chapter III have particular relevance for Malta at Mediterranean rather than European-wide scale. The landscapes of the Mediterranean region have several common traits, emanating from a history that unifies the region, both in natural and anthropogenic terms. This is particularly the case if one considers landscape in its broadest sense, to also incorporate the sea. It is thus possible to talk of a Mediterranean identity; indeed, the term "Mediterraneanism" has been defined with respect to several landscape aspects, including vegetation, geomorphology and land use. The need for pan-Mediterranean collaboration is, however, more than merely a matter of history and culture. Several threats to landscape extend across the region. One issue which dramatically illustrates this factor is the issue of illegal immigration from the poorer North African shore to the more affluent countries of Southern Europe. In the case of Malta, the pressures exerted by an

immigrant population are substantial, and are likely to manifest themselves in increased urbanization and demand for resources.

The way forward

An assessment of the *status quo* serves to establish trajectories for future action. A number of aspects emerge. One of these is the way in which landscape is understood and interpreted. We argue for the need to expand the understanding of landscape beyond the conventional visual domain, to include all senses (Phillips, 2005), as well as intangible social and cultural values. As Pedrolì and Adolfsson (2002) note, the European Landscape Convention is revolutionary precisely in that it argues for common guidelines for a diversified management of European landscapes, bringing together base targets for understanding the *true* landscape in relation to natural processes, the *right* landscape in the local cultural context, and the *real* landscape on the basis of coordinated public action. To date, Malta's focus appears to have been primarily on the *true* landscape, and more attention needs to be paid to *right* and *real* landscapes.

Whereas past vernacular history was often interwoven with a variety of landscape aspects, an increasingly consumerist lifestyle has diminished the attachment to place, and the sense of self and identity is no longer closely linked to regional landscapes. Landscape planning may need explore ways to re-establish linkages between people and land, in order to render the externalities of landscape problems an internalized aspect of society. At the policy level, there is also a clear need for landscape to become a key theme and a focus for attention. Within the Maltese Islands, the subject of landscape is still somewhat peripheral. Despite the unique landscape heritage that the Islands enjoy, there has been little focus on marketing landscape as heritage in its own right, and the

impact of this is sadly evident in the extent to which landscape has suffered at the hands of development in recent decades.

An integrated landscape strategy should focus on *all* aspects of landscape, including seascapes.

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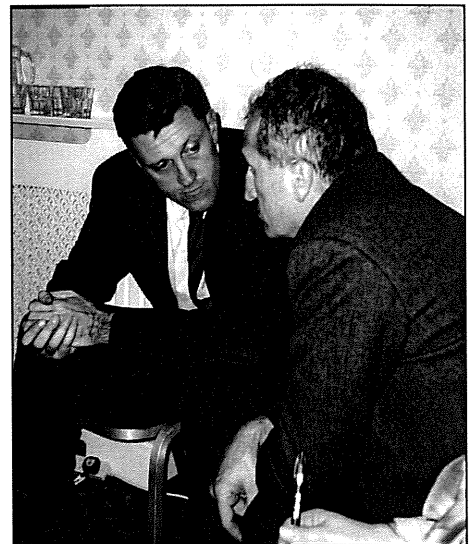
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~~Building Co-operative Systems around the European Landscape Convention~~

~~Riccardo Priore~~

~~Local and regional authorities started work on a draft European Landscape Convention in 1994 within the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and at first had to deal with reactions ranging from simple lack of interest, through barely disguised derision to open hostility.~~

~~At the time, the proposal to produce~~



~~Riccardo Priore and Mauro Agnoletti in conclave~~

~~the outline of an international treaty on the landscape was considered by an important number of governments impossible to fulfil. A decade on, this lack of understanding is behind us and it might perhaps be claimed that the dream is about to become reality. Today, as an international treaty, the ELC sets forth binding principles committing the Contracting States to adopt policies and measures aimed at promoting landscape~~