

Blue Flag Environmental Activities

Report 2017
Pauline Dingli



Hondoq ir-Rummien Gozo

Themes for Summer 2017

The themes selected for Blue Flag's environmental and educational activities for 2017 are in line with the international theme for *Sustainable Tourism for Development*.

The European Union will be hosting its 2017 conference, *An Ocean for Life* in Malta. This follows the *International Ocean Conference* held by the United Nations in New York last June. The objective of Malta for this conference is to *launch a major initiative on international ocean governance*. The conference aims to

identify solutions and commit actions in order to address some of the most important challenges the oceans are faced with: marine protection, marine pollution, climate change impact, sustainable fisheries etc.

The MTA's Blue Flag initiatives are in line with such strategies and create awareness on the coastal and marine environment with the concept of *Caring for the sea that unites us*.



Marine species injured or dying with plastic are on the increase as is the floating plastic in our oceans. One of the turtles that were released back into the sea had been operated upon and saved after having such plastic removed from its system. Plastic beer-can-holders are a common culprit for many other injuries with marine fauna.



Activities organised this year include; Creating a turtle on the sand at sunset; coastal and underwater clean ups; sustainable use of the coast; evening coastal walks; visits to marine museums and information centres; natural flora exhibitions; marine photographic competition; visits around Malta's smaller islands and together with a number of articles and a beach newsletter helped in disseminating information about the ongoing campaigns that the MTA organises towards butts off the sand, litter free beaches, waste separation and healthy marine life.

2017 also marks the 30th anniversary of the Blue Flag Programme which strives for sustainable beach management and environmental education.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Themes for Summer 2017	2
Mellieha Bay.....	4
1. Caring for the Sea – Motor-free Sailing	4
2. Biodiversity at the Falconry	4
3. Sea Salt Harvest.....	6
4. Tears of St Lawrence	6
5. Ghadira Nature Reserve.....	7
6. Create a Turtle at Sunset	7
Golden Bay	8
1. Majjistral Visitor Centre and Lectures	8
2. Exhibition of Marine Life and Sensible Waste Separation	9
3. Golden Bay Trekking	10
4. Underwater clean-up and snorkelling	10
5. Turtle Release and Litter-free Beaches.....	11
St George’s Bay	12
1. Ocean Plastic Conference	12
2. World Oceans Day Photographic Competition	13
3. Painting and Drawing Birds.....	13
4. Butts Off and No Tobacco Day	14
5. New Street Banner Installations	15
6. Dingli Cliffs Walk	15
Fond Ghadir.....	16
1. Fond Ghadir Clean Up	16
2. Video Clip Project and Sustainable Operations	17
3. Sand Art.....	18
4. Castle and Gardens Visit	18
5. Coastal Walk (Marsascala)	19
Qawra Point	20
1. Salina Visitor Centre.....	20
2. Aquarium Visit and Spot the Alien Fish.....	21
3. Qawra Point Clean up	21
4. Supervisors Seminar and Beach Audit	22
5. Salina Visitor Centre and Bird Watching.....	23
Bugibba Perched Beach	24
1. Sustainability Articles and Newsletter	24
2. Bugibba Clean Up.....	25
3. The Science of Natural Flora	25
4. Bird Park Visit.....	26
5. Viticulture.....	27
6. Coastal Heritage – Stalagmite Caves and The Oldest Free-standing Building in the World.....	27

Mellicha Bay



1. Caring for the Sea – Motor-free Sailing

Wind power is on the increase for generating clean energy free of charge. This event was about wind power sailing as an alternative for fuel on the sea. The destination of the sailing was to reach Comino and see the diverse garrigue flora of the Island. On arrival, a number of plastic bottles and plastic glasses were encountered in many hollows on the rocks and one person took the initiative to call other participants and collect the plastic encountered and dispose of it appropriately. A short walk to the coastal tower highlighted the fauna that resided on the Island, the indigenous flora, the geology and the cave systems. A final stop was a dip in the clear sea of the Blue Lagoon before heading back to the mainland.



2. Biodiversity at the Falconry

The Malta Falconry holds an ancient tradition practiced on Malta where the falcon was trained to catch prey including wild rabbits and pigeons for consumption. Although bred falcons do not catch live prey any more, the tradition of rearing falcons is still kept. The Grandmasters of the Knights of St John were committed to send a falcon to the King every year as a fief for giving them the Islands of Malta.

The Falconry farmhouse of the Grandmasters, built around four hundred years ago, has been restored recently and turned into an information centre. The falconry, besides holding this tradition, exhibits information on the diversity of the life in the surrounding countryside, including crawling insects and reptiles. The participants of this event were able to enjoy a live demonstration and hold a few of the birds of prey on their hands.



3. Sea Salt Harvest

Salt production was one of the earliest cottage industries that operated on the Maltese Islands. Sea salt was always present around the Islands; surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea and with long dry summers, the sea water in the hollows of the rocks and salt flats evaporates by the sun and leaves behind salt crystals. It was used mostly to preserve food, thus a precious commodity in a world where refrigeration was unknown. Ghadira Bay is the foreground of a salt flat. The salt flat gave the village of Mellieha (salt pan) its name. Due to the salt pans of the Maltese Islands, stretches of the coast remained undeveloped and in their pristine condition for thousands of years. This activity of salt production and harvest disseminated the cultural and historical value of this sustainable practice that yielded solely on natural rock and weather elements leaving the coast in its original state.



4. Tears of St Lawrence

The clear, dark sky of the Mediterranean is an ideal location for star gazing and the annual August meteor storms are events that many astronomers wait for. The frequent shooting stars in the evening sky are also a wonderful display that attracts the attention of the general public. Participants for this event were unaware of the frequency of such activity during a meteor storm. While they prepared to stay seated and watch, most got excited and spend the whole time identifying the moving lights in the sky.



5. Ghadira Nature Reserve

This activity, like many others, had to be postponed twice due to heat waves that hit the Islands. The guide warned that fauna hibernated during the hot weather. Finally it was organised again after the first autumn rain before beach operations were concluded. Birdlife representative gave information about the resident species and the migrating birds that visit the reserve. He showed photos on the information panels of the visitor centre and by indicating from the viewing point. The participants were able to roam around hidden pathways and hideaways along the reserve.



6. Create a Turtle at Sunset

Sunset on the beach on a full moon is popular in Malta and this was an ideal setting to collect all the children on the beach to create a turtle. First they were encouraged to take the painting brush and copy a turtle on a T shirt and later everyone joined in creating a sand turtle. Two massive turtles were created while the younger children attempted their own smaller ones with moulds. The children and their parents were given information on the turtle that had hatched the year before and the importance to keep on the lookout for turtles that may be seeking a beach to lay its eggs at sunset.



Golden Bay



1. Majjistral Visitor Centre and Lectures

Majjistral Nature and History Park (MP) is situated on the North West of Malta, forms part of the Natura 2000 Network and incorporates Golden Bay within. It cuts across the Islands and reaches Mellieha Bay on the North East. The visitor centre gives information on the flora, fauna, marine and geology of Park land. One of the activities that were held within this centre was the *Science of Natural Flora*. A temporary exhibition of flora species that grow on the sand dunes and in the vicinity was exhibited and explained. After the activity all the children were given a deck of cards that give information of every flower in three different languages. The children were guided on a short walk to the beach and were encouraged to look for and walk on existing footpaths.





2. Exhibition of Marine Life and Sensible Waste Separation

Waste separation is another campaign that is repeated every year, organised in different scenarios on various beaches every time. This activity in collaboration with Wasteserve gave the participants information about the different coloured bins and bin liners that one could find on every beach. The people were asked questions in the form of a quiz. Prizes were given during the quiz. To make the activity more interesting, an exhibition on marine skeletons was provided. Finally a talk on the Blue Flag programme closed the activity and participants went eagerly for a swim at Golden Bay. Extra lifeguards were appointed for this activity to guard on the younger participants.



3. Golden Bay Trekking

Golden Bay is a pocket beach surrounded by sand dunes, high rocky cliffs, boulder screes and red *terra rossa* plains. Trekking within this environment gives the experience of changing landscapes and interesting geological features. The group was prepared for rough terrain and for climbing. A photographer explained the species that he was photographing and other distinctive characteristics encountered along the way. The views from the high cliffs overlooking the blue sea were breathtaking and several sea birds could be admired. Feedback was very positive and everyone commented that the experience was amazing!



4. Underwater clean-up and snorkelling

Golden Bay is popular beach and attracts crowds during the weekend. It also attracts boat lovers to stop and enjoy the day from their boat outside the swimming area. Some litter tends to be washed on shore and it is cleaned regularly, but other litter sinks to bottom and once unseen it tends to remain on the sea bed for longer periods. This underwater clean up was meant to collect the litter by hand from the sea-bed seen through snorkels. The team went out with garbage bags and dived for the litter that could be reached. Participants commented that the experience gave them the possibility to watch different fish that reside on the sandy sea bed, when they were used to snorkelling and seeing fish of other lush rocky beaches.





5. Turtle Release and Litter-free Beaches

Every year injured turtles are encountered around the Maltese Islands. Some are caught in fishermen's nets and some are injured by floating litter including plastic. Nature Trust rescues the turtles and nurses them until they are fit to be released in the sea once again.

This year three were released into the open seas in a small ceremony which included an exercise with Wasteserve personnel who demonstrated waste separation on beaches and a short talk about the harm that fly litter can do to marine fauna including turtles.



St George's Bay



1. Ocean Plastic Conference

The European Union will be hosting its 2017 conference, *An Ocean for Life* in Malta. The conference aims to address some of the most important challenges that the oceans are faced with: marine pollution, climate change impact, sustainable fisheries etc. This activity was held at the National Aquarium where the theme featured was Plastic Oceans. Children were encouraged to create an image for the theme. Marine fauna and cetacean remains were exhibited during the event.





2. World Oceans Day Photographic Competition

In continuation with the same theme, activities were held at *Tal-Handaq* secondary school where the whole school participated in the various activities. One of the activities included a photography competition regarding the sea that surrounds us. Students had all summer to photograph anything that was related to the marine environment. The winner of the competition was awarded with an underwater camera sponsored by the MTA under the Blue Flag Malta programme.

Winner of Photographic Camera in the World Oceans Day Competition



3. Painting and Drawing Birds

Birdlife Malta disseminates information about the local avifauna. This activity was held in collaboration with Birdlife Malta where children were given information about different local birds and encouraged them to paint and cut the birds in a fun painting activity.





4. Butts Off and No Tobacco Day

Butts-off campaign is an ongoing effort by the beach managers every summer. New initiatives are introduced every year while the older material is refreshed and reused. Again this year it included the participation of the Malta Medical Students Association (MMSA) to make people aware of the hazard of tobacco and emphasise the protection of the skin during peak hours. This activity took place on **every beach** being managed by the MTA. Students and beach staff spoke to the beach goers on the good practices. This *Butts Off* the beach campaign was also aired live on TV news for a whole day to educate the general public.



5. New Street Banner Installations

The ecological street banners displayed along St George's Bay were damaged with strong winds and some could be repaired. However new designs with the Blue Flag logo have been prepared for a new set to be installed along the street after the coming winter.



6. Dingli Cliffs Walk

The sheer cliffs plunging vertically into the deep sea at Dingli offer good breeding grounds for various seagulls as well as the national bird; the Blue Rock Thrush. The cliffs also offer magnificent sea and country views and a pleasant breeze during a summer walk. During this walk, participants could enjoy photographing nature and listening to sea birds while another participant explained on the geology, flora and fauna that are typical to the area. The walk covered a distance of six kilometres from the northern side of the cliffs all the way to the Siggiewi side and ending at St Mary Magdalene Chapel esplanade. The chapel was badly damaged with lightning during winter and is now fully restored.



Fond Ghadir



1. Fond Ghadir Clean Up

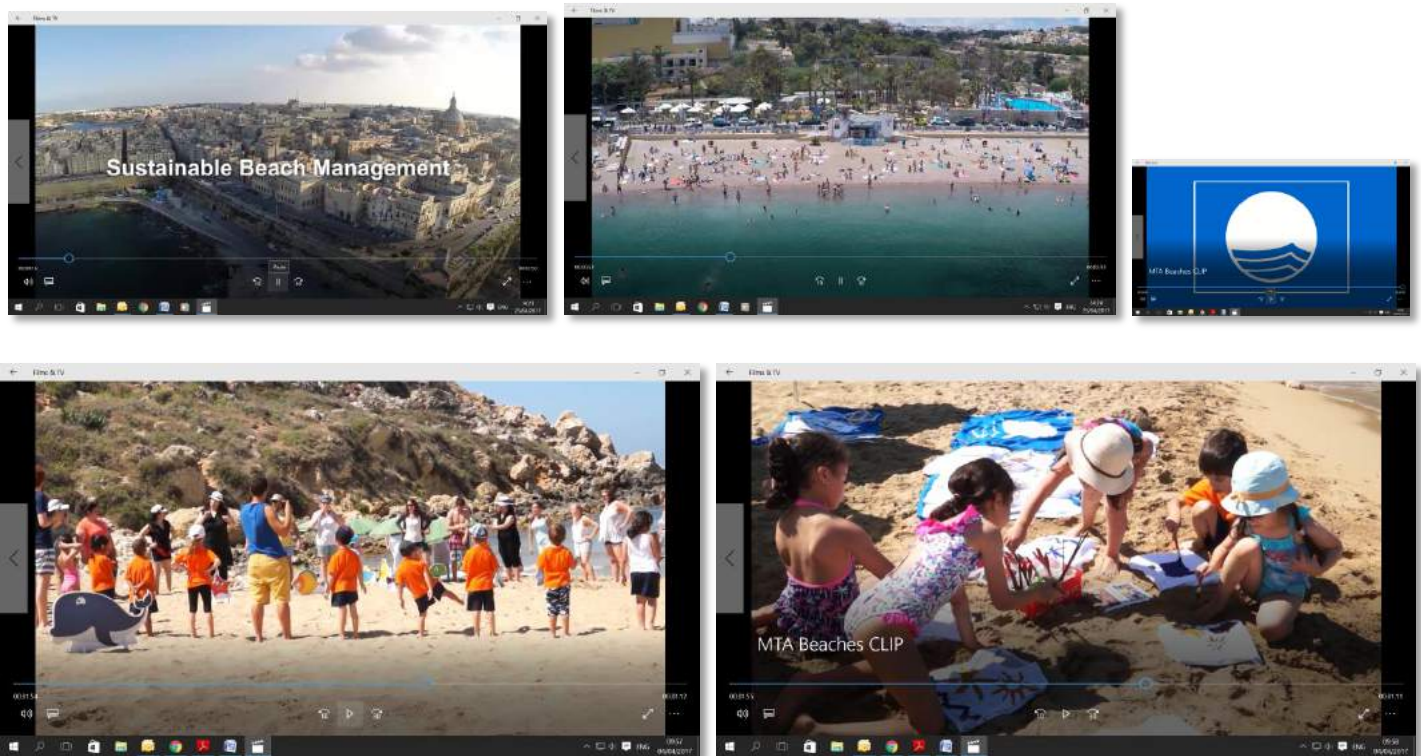
As in other rocky beaches, cleaning at Fond Ghadir has to be done by hand. Litter tends to stick to the rocks inside the hollows and although the beach seems to be clean, litter is visible when walking on the rocks. A general clean-up was organised at the beginning of the Blue Flag season. All waste collected was separated and taken away by wasteserve within the hour.





2. Video Clip Project and Sustainable Operations

In continuation with the sustainable development efforts, a video clip was produced to highlight the positive elements of the beach operations to enhance sustainable use of Malta's coast. Beach supervisors are trained towards sustainable development, and in turn they can educate the beachgoers towards sustainable practices on beaches. The greatest problems encountered were to refrain from handling marine species like starfish and crabs, and proper waste separation. Fond Ghadir is a rocky beach and cigarette buds left on site during the evenings are always a challenge for the beach cleaners.



3. Sand Art

Fond Ghadir rocky beach is used mostly by adults. Since there is no sand, this activity was done with artificial sand, where children were given coloured sand and different pictures to create sand art. Colours were mixed with the sand so that the children could be creative and admire the finished results.



4. Castle and Gardens Visit

Buskett is the largest patch of woodland on the Islands and needs to be preserved. It hosts endemic and Mediterranean trees, shrubs and flora. Early summer is the best period to visit the woodland and enjoy the variety of lush leaves following the winter rains. Buskett also hosts a natural spring with specific wetland flora and water grasses. The participants of this activity were guided along footpaths where they could enjoy the best variety of trees as well as viewpoints. The highlight of this event was a visit within the Grandmasters' country abode: The Verdala Castle. The Castle was completed in 1581 and used as a hunting lodge within the woods. Dispersed around the woods one can also enjoy historic structures including the Grandmasters' falconry, stables, servants' quarters and other small ancient features that have recently been restored.





5. Coastal Walk (Marsascala)

Marsascala is a coastal town surrounded by open countryside. The flora along this coastal stretch is typical to succulents with thick leaves and tiny flowers. It is different from other coastal areas of the Islands. It has adapted to the harsh conditions of strong winds carrying salt particles and poor quality soil. Fauna encountered along the way included geckoes that were sunbathing and other reptiles like a small snake, Ocellated skink and similar animals.





1. Salina Visitor Centre

The Salina Salt Pan has opened for the public after undergoing restoration for a number of years. Its visitor centre is furnished with interpretation panels that explain the history of the salt pans and salt production of the Islands. Salt production in Malta was one of the first cottage industries that took place around its shores. Documents reveal that certain salt pans have been producing salt in the same artisan manner for over 500 years and are still productive. Salt pans helped in keeping the coast in pristine condition and kept away development. Salt harvest has been the livelihood of many families in the past, but as in other European countries, it is declining steadily.





2. Aquarium Visit and Spot the Alien Fish

A visit to the aquarium is always an event that children look out for and enjoy. This activity was organised in collaboration with the International Ocean Institute of the University of Malta. Children were encouraged to create a project on how to protect marine life. The projects were exhibited and Her Excellency the President of Malta gave out the prizes to the winners. During this activity a video of marine life was shown and questions were put during the video clip to see how attentive the children were. Feedback was amazing and they were happy to proceed to the underground aquarium to see the live fish.



3. Qawra Point Clean up

Qawra Point is another beach that has to be cleaned by hand picking. Since most of the litter was left by people who used the coast, a group of children were taken on site to see the impact of human activity on the beach. They were made aware of the harm that fly-litter caused in the sea. They were given instructions on what and how to pick certain litter.



Many thanks for the collaboration for the event held today icw Blue Flag Programme of MTA for students of St Ignatius College Middle School Geo Club and Ekoskola committee. As you are aware - we collected 5 recycling bags full and 3 mixed bags as well as glass bottles. The students noted the large amount of cigarettes as well as plastics.

Annalise Falzon, Teacher of Geography Geo Club

4. Supervisors Seminar and Beach Audit

The annual beach supervisor's seminar was organised to make the youths aware of the beach processes, the environment and sustainable beach management. The beach campaigns of Butts off and waste separation were explained and they were made aware of the importance of wearing sunscreens and hats.

Following the seminar, all supervisors were taken on the nearest Blue Flag beach to perform an audit, as is normally done on the checklist of Nature Trust representatives.





5. Salina Visitor Centre and Bird Watching

There are various bird watching spots on the Maltese Islands and the Salina is one of them. The marshland around the Salina and the Salina itself also offer breeding grounds for birds. For this activity, a member of the Birdlife Malta greeted the group and explained about birds that visit the Salina during different seasons. Participants were lucky to encounter a number of different birds that were resting from a long journey. Egrets, herons and seagulls were among the birds that were encountered.



Bugibba Perched Beach



1. Sustainability Articles and Newsletter

A project that is in line with sustainability is the printing and publishing of educational articles, newsletter, TV programmes and information clips. Articles and programmes published included the Blue Flag Programme, sustainable beach management, waste recycling and separation, butts off the sand and marine life.





2. Bugibba Clean Up

Bugibba is a night hub where tourists and locals walk along the beach and promenade till the early hours of the morning. The coast is rugged and litter tends to be trapped in every hollow or shrub. This activity was organised in collaboration with the Malta National Aquarium and participants included several adults, children and parents. Plastic bottles and beer cans were the most common and their bags were taken away separately.



3. The Science of Natural Flora

Esplora is a new science centre in the south of Malta with various science experiments, games and exhibits that educate people of all ages. The planetarium runs a short underwater video with excellent shots filmed around the Maltese Islands. Participants lost themselves exploring the interesting rooms and finally rested in the cafeteria where a flora exhibition called *The Science of Natural Flora* was displayed. Information was given on each photo exhibited and the area and season that the particular flower could be seen. All participants were given a deck of cards where the researched information is explained in three languages.



4. Bird Park Visit

A visit to the birdpark is an event that many look forward to. The beautiful, free-roaming flamingos, egrets and ibises are a rare find in Malta and being able to stay near them and photograph their movements is a real pleasure. The park guide gave information about the bird families on the park, their food, migrations, reproductive systems and their habits. The experience and feedback are always positive.



5. Viticulture

Meridiana Wine Estate has pioneered in Malta the production of premium quality wines – internationally acclaimed wines made from grapes grown in Maltese soil. This activity took us into the vineyards to understand better the environmental conditions that make one vine in one country better than in another. The lecturer explained the hours of sunshine, temperature, wind conditions and length of seasons and soil component that determine the quality of the wine. She also explained about the indigenous species in comparison with the adaptation of imported species of vines and how traditional farmers coped with difficult weather conditions but still achieved positive harvests. After the tour the activity ended with a visit to the cellars and a taste of different wines produced on site.



6. Coastal Heritage – Stalagmite Caves and the Oldest Free-standing Building in the World

This event took us to the sister Island of Gozo where the first stop was the newly built visitor centre of the capital city the Cittadella. This was followed by a tour around the city and its bastion walls. The 60+ group was then guided to the city gardens for a rest where they could admire the many plants and trees of the area. After lunch the group was split in four for the visit of the geological stalagmite caves. The guide explained how the stalactites formed over the thousands of years. The last visit took us to the visitor centre of the oldest free-standing building in the world – The Ggantija Temples. The guide explained briefly how these gigantic rocks could have been delivered to be erected and put together in the form of three apses that together formed the sacred temple.



THE END