STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT REPORT

2005

Sub-report 6:
Landscape

Malta Environment & Planning Authority
January 2006
6. Landscape

Key messages

- The Maltese landscape may be characterised as a cultural landscape with a combination of elements that give it a distinct character that is unique in the world.
- Since 1990 there has been a limited but noticeable improvement in townscapes in terms of architectural quality and public amenities, with more attention to landscaping, treatment of facades and public open space. Overall, however, landscape is threatened by the increasing built up area, industrial and coastal development, taller buildings on urban fringes obstructing views of historical centres, modern agricultural practices, increasing vehicular access, littering, poor standards of design and work, and lack of maintenance.
- The Landscape Assessment Study has provided a firm foundation for better landscape protection in strategic and subsidiary land-use plans.
- Some important areas of high quality landscape character, particularly in Gozo and Comino and inland Malta, have not yet been given statutory protection.

In 2000 Malta signed, but has not ratified, the European Landscape Convention, which aims ‘to promote European landscape protection, management and planning, and to organise European co-operation on landscape issues’. Parties to the Convention undertake to provide legal recognition for the value of landscapes, to ensure that participatory procedures are put in place to establish and implement protective policies, and that landscape is integrated into land-use planning policies. For Malta, much of the latter is already done. The Convention also highlights the need for landscapes to be identified, characterised and monitored in order to define landscape quality objectives. Accordingly, MEPA undertook to carry out a national landscape assessment, the first draft of which was issued for public consultation in late 2004, and on which this review is based. The Landscape Assessment Study has provided a firm foundation for better landscape protection in strategic and subsidiary land-use plans.

6.1 Status of the Maltese landscape

Landscape Character

Malta’s natural landscape is characterised by karstic rock and typical Mediterranean vegetation and fauna that are relatively inconspicuous. As a result of human occupation on the Islands for over 7,000 years, the landscape is heavily influenced by human activity. Malta’s landscape is physically determined by its limestone-dominated geomorphology, its dry and mild climate, its biodiversity (both natural and human-introduced), and its settlement patterns and agricultural practices. Malta’s land mass is gently sloping to the north-east, and is characterised by a

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164 Article 3 of the Convention.
series of low hills on the north-west, with cliffs dominating the south-western coast and shallow bays on the eastern edge. Pluvial valleys formed by long-term climatic influences cut across the width of the island. The following are key elements of Malta’s landscape:

- Visibility of the sea, so largely a coastal landscape;
- Shallow coastal waters and presence of offshore islands enhances seascapes;
- Significant water bodies tend to be absent from inland areas;
- Relative absence of forests, which enhances appreciation of long distance views;
- Terraced fields;
- Many panoramic spots accessible from road network;
- Cultural heritage is strongly intertwined with natural heritage;
- Fortified structures dominate the Inner Harbour area, and other ex-military structures in the countryside also enhance the landscape;
- Churches and large buildings tend to dominate the urban skylines. Churches are intimately linked to the character of the traditional urban settlements;
- Cubic massing within urban areas and the preponderance of flat roofs;
- Dominance of franka (soft) stone in architecture;
- Most urban areas concentrated within a radius of 5 km from the Grand Harbour;
- Most bays along eastern and northern coasts of Malta and some bays in Gozo dominated by modern development;
- Sensitivity to detail: relatively small features imposed on a sensitive landscape can have an disproportionate influence on long distance views.165

Due to these attributes the Maltese landscape may be characterised as a cultural landscape with a combination of elements that give it a distinct character that is unique in the world.

Landscape change
The Landscape Assessment provides a summary of the principal changes to the Maltese Landscape in the period between 1990 and 2000. It indicates that the urban sprawl of the 1980s has been significantly contained, however, that some settlements continued to merge into one another, undermining the physical distinctiveness of the settlements.

165 MEPA 2004a.
The Assessment notes that landscaping is being given more attention, particularly around major projects and public amenities. Localized improvements in treatment of facades and open spaces are noted in historic urban and coastal areas, especially promenades. However it also indicates that urban skylines continued to deteriorate, especially close to urban fringes and that roof clutter (e.g. antennae and water tanks) continued to degrade skylines. Multi-coloured flags, lights and other decorations, on the other hand enhance urban landscapes during celebrations.

In rural areas, the Assessment notes that the rate of loss of agricultural land has decreased, but there was a higher level of visual influence resulting from modern agricultural practices (animal husbandry units, greenhouses, storage facilities, intensive irrigation facilities). Between 1994 and 2000, 147 applications for greenhouses were approved, raising their footprint from 17 ha in 1988 to 56 ha in 1999/2000. However the rate of agricultural land loss has decreased: 84 ha per annum were lost in the 15 years between 1986 and 2001, while in the preceding 15 years it was 213 ha per year. In addition, greater accessibility has brought the more remote natural areas under greater pressure from human activities. Waste disposal and dilapidation in the countryside continued to represent a major driver of degradation. Between 1995 and 1997, 73 scrapyards were reported and subjected to enforcement notices. Industrial development resulted in negative impacts in some areas (e.g. Freeport area, San Ġwann, Hal Far, Xewkija).

In coastal areas, fish farms have introduced unsightly offshore features. However, the visual footprint of these facilities is however fairly limited and are generally overwhelmed by the scale of the surrounding water body and large marine vessels. Sometimes, oilrigs are moored a few kilometres offshore, and this has quite an adverse impact on the seascape. The Assessment concludes that there was a general improvement in the quality of architecture and public amenities, which has however been highly variable and mostly not up to standard. Poor workmanship, lack of attention to detail, inappropriate design and lack of a maintenance culture continue to contribute to dereliction and degradation.

As has been described in Chapters 1 and 4, there are a number of pressures on the land, all of which contribute to landscape degradation, such as housing and other building development, motor vehicles, and energy demand (see also Sub-report 1) is another main contributor to landscape degradation (e.g. through

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166 MEPA 2003.
168 Buttigieg 1999.
169 This issue is being mitigated through the relocation of all tuna penning activities further out to sea.
development, waste production and increased traffic), even though the industry is heavily dependant on good landscape quality. Energy generation infrastructure has the potential to have a significant impact on the landscape. In the context of its international obligations (see also Sub-reports 1 and 3), Malta will need to reduce the rate of growth of harmful emissions related energy generation. This might entail producing energy from renewable sources, which like the current fossil fuel stations, might also have a negative impact on landscape quality. The high increase in vehicle ownership has translated into additional degradation of the landscape related to transport infrastructure provision; while the lengths of Malta and Gozo only total 42 km, in 2004 Malta had 2,227 km of roads (an increase of 57 km since 1998). The total area of road network for the Maltese Islands is 18 square kilometres, representing eight percent of the total land area. There has been a positive development in waste management, related to the recent practice to fill quarries with inert materials, thereby removing some of the scars in the landscape. The eventual rehabilitation of the two major landfills will also have a positive effect.

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*Public perceptions of landscape value*

A research exercise carried out in parallel with the development of MEPA’s landscape model, based on public rating of 40 photographs of Maltese landscapes, provides useful information on public perceptions of landscape value. Landscapes with a varied topography and steeper slopes were more appreciated than plains; greener and less built-up areas were also highly valued, and they mostly coincide with higher and steeper areas. The proximity to the coast is a major factor influencing the perception of landscape value: photographs of the open countryside near the coast were rated the highest, and when the sea was included (e.g. for the Marsa power station), the average scores of the photos rose. Lush valleys and fortifications were also highly valued, and settlements were generally perceived to be of neutral value, scoring very highly when churches were in the

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170 http://www.maltatransport.com
centre, and lower when modern buildings on the edge of settlements dominated
the photographs. Industrial areas, quarries and landfills were judged to detract
significantly from scenic value. The photograph receiving the lowest scores was
that of Maghtab, despite the countryside and sea surrounding the landfill.\textsuperscript{171}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{plate61.png}
\caption{Most favoured landscape image for public}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{plate62.png}
\caption{Least favoured landscape image for public}
\end{figure}

\section*{6.2 Action taken}

\subsection*{Landscaping of public areas}

The Environmental Landscapes Consortium, a public-private partnership launched
in 2001, has improved the appearance of many of Malta’s public areas and
gardens. In addition, a Tree for You (34U) afforestation campaign will create
recreational areas integrated with national and regional parks at Delimara, Xrobb l-
Ghagin, Ta’ Qali, Salina and Mellieha,\textsuperscript{172} although some public afforested areas that
are not being actively managed, such as the Tas-Silg area, are seriously degraded
and suffering from vandalism.

\subsection*{Landscape Sensitivity and Planning}

The Landscape Study identified areas of high and very high landscape sensitivity,
which extend over 51 percent of the Islands (see Map 6.1). It also identifies
panoramic viewpoints, mostly along the coast and the escarpments of the Western
Maltese Plateau.

\textsuperscript{171} MEPA 2004b.
\textsuperscript{172} MRAE 2003.
The principal landscape protection tool of the land-use planning system is to designate Areas of High Landscape Value (AHLVs). AHLVs were scheduled in 1996 and 2000, and cover 12 percent of the Maltese Islands. They include Malta’s western cliffs, the Victoria Lines, the Rabat/Mdina area, the Grand Harbour area, Delimara, and Xlendi in Gozo. Other protective designations are being proposed in the emerging Local Plans, as encouraged by the Structure Plan. However, some important areas of high quality landscape character, particularly in Gozo and Comino and inland Malta, have not yet been given statutory protection.

The emergent policy on tall buildings has also taken landscape sensitivity on board. On the scale of individual projects, the land-use planning system imposes landscaping conditions on permissions for major development projects. The original site is surveyed before development to identify any protected tree species, and these trees are incorporated into the new design or transplanted to appropriate locations. Landscaping schemes are then agreed, taking into consideration embellishment, screening, density, footpaths and the use of indigenous species. For smaller developments in urban areas, small plot sizes and parking conditions often do not allow much space for landscaping. In rural areas a prime aim of

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173 Ministry for Development of Infrastructure 1990.
landscaping is the screening of development from long- and medium-distance views.

*Rural Development Plan (RDP)*

The RDP is a key tool for protecting rural landscapes: it views the significance of agriculture to Malta in terms of maintaining the landscape and cultural traditions. Its aim is to coordinate the natural, human and financial resources of the agricultural and rural communities of Malta to ensure the sustainable growth of the rural economy and an improvement in the rural way of life in a fair and balanced way.\(^{174}\) One of its medium-term objectives is to maintain cultural landscapes to generate positive externalities.\(^{175}\) Accordingly, the RDP includes a priority to promote environmentally friendly production methods in line with protecting rural heritage. An agri-environment measure has been identified under this priority 'to conserve and enhance the landscape, wildlife and historic heritage of rural Malta'. This provides support for farmers switching to organic methods (see Chapter 4), conservation of indigenous agricultural species such as the Maltese Ox and the Holm Oak, and financial incentives for repair of rubble walls. The latter has had a successful first period, and represents an important contribution to landscape protection. During 2004 the Building Industry Consultative Council organised a training programme in rubble wall construction with 300 participants, and 500 metres of rubble wall were reconstructed. Training programmes continued during 2005.


\(^{175}\) RDD – MRAE 2004.
References


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