

## **The destruction of Sikka Bajda**

by

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Sikka Bajda is situated 3 kilometres off St Paul's Islands and extends towards the Malta-Comino channel. Its shallower parts are approximately 4.5 kilometres long x 1.5 kilometres wide. Sikka, meaning reef, is more of a plateau ranging from 26 metres deep in its southeastern side to as shallow as 12 metres in the northwestern end. This reef is larger than Qawra and St Paul's Bay put together.

We started diving on Sikka Bajda some forty years ago, soon after obtaining our divers' licence. It used to be a breeding ground for all sorts of marine life. We have been diving this reef constantly, in every season of the year, for all these years. Over the years, we have seen the causes and effects of the deterioration of marine life on this natural breeding ground and we hope to offer some practical solutions to remedy this environmental disaster.

In our opinion, there are four major human activities which are destroying marine life on this reef. We are listing them in their order of destruction, starting by the most damaging to possibly the least damaging activity. Video footage shows the destruction from this selfish human activity.

### **Octopus traps**

In our early diving days, fishermen from St Paul's Bay and Mellieħa Bay would come out in their small boats and they would drop a line of about 10 octopus traps tied to one another. A Surface Marker Buoy (SMB) tied at each end would indicate their location. They would return the following day to retrieve their traps and take them back with them.

The situation right now is tragically quite different. At first sight one would think that these are no longer used because there are no SMBs bobbing on the surface. In reality there are lines of 50 traps

or more encircling the reef. The use of modern technology - depth finders and Global Positioning System (GPS) - allows the fishermen to drop the traps at the far ends of the reef, where the seabed starts to drop down to deeper waters. These areas are usually more abundant in marine life, more than the flat plateau.

They are not using SMBs to mark the ends of their lines because a GPS can bring them to the exact location and with a grappling hook they can easily pull up their lines.

These traps are being left constantly on the seabed and never removed! When the fisherman decides to go to check his catch, he locates part of the line and retrieves what is in the traps, dropping the same traps back onto the seabed in the exact same location.

Many traps are missed and some are not checked in a very long time. We often come across abandoned traps that haven't been visited in months. But they continue to entrap fish in them! And not just octopus. Weaker fish, dying from starvation due to their entrapment, lure other fish into the traps. The only species benefitting from this selfish activity is the *Busufu (Bearded Fireworm - Hermodice Carunculata)*. These worms can enter and exit the traps at will and they feed on the dying and dead fish inside. No wonder their numbers have exploded.

The Fishery Regulations specify that the use of *nassi tal-qarnit* (octopus traps) "is permitted without any licence at all times and in all localities."

### Proposed Solution

The law has to be updated and needs to specify that,

- i) Only licensed full-time and part-time fishermen can use the octopus traps.
- ii) A maximum number of traps, not exceeding fifteen traps, can be tied together in a single line.
- iii) An SMB at each end of the line to indicate their location, with the fisherman's registration number on each SMB. The fisherman has to place a card tied to the SMB indicating the date he last visited the traps.
- iv) The traps have to be retrieved and relocated. They cannot remain in the same location indefinitely.

- v) Any abandoned or inactive traps (without bait in them and without an SMB) can be reported to ERA who will send divers to inspect and to confiscate such traps.

## **Bunkering**

Sikka Bajda has become a place where large ships are allowed to anchor so that they can be fuelled and receive supplies. This is a relatively big industry that creates jobs. But why are ships allowed, possibly instructed, to drop their anchors on the reef?

In most countries, heavy fines are imposed on boats dropping their anchor on a patch of Posidonia Seagrass. On Sikka Bajda we have meadows of Posidonia Seagrass which have been ploughed by large ships' anchors! (See video) Large boulders, previously affording a habitat to various fish and marine organisms, bulldozed and overturned by the dragging of anchors and their heavy chains on the seabed.

## **Proposed Solution**

- i) The immediate solution would be for the competent authorities to instruct ships where they can drop their anchors. To advise the ships that they can anchor in the vicinity of Sikka Bajda but the anchors have to be dropped to a depth of 40+ metres. Heavy fines to be imposed on ships dropping their anchor in less than 30 metres.
- ii) The long term solution would be for large moorings set outside the reef. Ships could tie to the large buoys and avoid dropping their anchors.

## **Tuna Farms**

The northeast tuna farm has already been relocated from inside Sikka Bajda, to shallower waters just outside the reef. They have increased their tuna pens from 8 to 12 and now 24 pens.

A comprehensive Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) by Adi Associates in 2018 highlights the impact on the environment that this particular tuna farm is creating.

It is not just the visible surface slime which is of concern. The amount of feed and fish excrement is similar to having another village and a sewage system out at sea. The EIA specifies that,

- i) *125 tonnes of food ingested by the tuna on a daily basis.*
- ii) *6.6 tonnes of fish oil released daily - Slime.*
- iii) *Uneaten baitfish represents 27.5 kg/day/cage.*
- iv) *Reduction in bottom water transparency.*
- v) *Deterioration in water quality due to increased nutrient loads.*

And this study is based on when they had 12 pens - they now have twenty-four.

It is obvious that this industry is adversely affecting the reef. With the power and influence the operators have on both political parties, it would seem easier to relocate the reef than the tuna farm.

### Proposed Solution

Relocate the farm only 1 mile further out. The farm would be anchored at a depth of 60 metres, well within the reach of their scuba divers and at a lesser depth than the tuna farms located in the south-east where they are located at a depth of 90 metres. At 60 metres outside Sikka Bajda the depth gradually drops to 130 metres. This extra volume of water will greatly reduce the adverse environmental effects on the reef and it should also reduce the amount of slime reaching our shores.

### **Boating and fast ferries**

The amount of sea traffic, increasing over the weekends, is also of concern. Especially in the shallower parts in the north-eastern part of the reef. The noise and turbulence from sea-craft impacts marine habitats. One has to be diving in the shallow parts when a large yacht, powerful motorboat or a fast ferry is speeding above to see the reaction of the fish below.

### Proposed Solution

Transport Malta should place visible buoys close to the southern part of the reef and to issue a notice to mariners that all sea craft commuting between their marinas and Comino, or other bays in the north, have to sail between the buoys and the mainland and that they must avoid speeding over the reef.

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We have enjoyed our seas and Sikka Bajda for all these years. It has been a rewarding experience. Both of us, in our own ways, gave back to the sea. We shall continue to enjoy our seas for as long as our health permits us to do so. We would like to save this once rich breeding ground for future generations.