

## Marine conservation is everyone's business!

The coastal and marine habitats and species enclosed within MPAs can only be safeguarded through the responsible exploitation by all of the resources held within the same marine space and through the conduction of responsible enjoyment activities. The vast majority of fishers operating within Maltese waters are small-scale, artisanal ones, meaning that they operate from small vessels which are shorter than 12m. This type of fishing is low-impact, especially when compared to the fishing conducted from larger boats by industrial fishers and to the destructive practice of trawling. Our waters can be enjoyed responsibly in a variety of ways, through, for example, coastal trekking, swimming, snorkelling, kayaking, SCUBA diving and stand-up paddling. Given its persistence in the marine environment, plastics exert a considerable ecological impact on our seas, with research pointing to the nefarious impacts of microplastics and of discarded fishing gear and macro litter on marine turtles, cetacean and shark species. Single use Plastic should be curbed and plastic litter and other items (e.g. cigarette butts) should be properly disposed.



Ras il-Hobz (Tal-Fessej)

## About the AMPPA Project

The AMPPA (Aree Marine Protette e Pesca Artigianale) project aims to create a new management tool for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), in consideration of the crucial role for the protection of the marine environment that these play whilst promoting the integration between resource protection needs and development needs of coastal communities. The tool proposed by the project is an integrated management of MPAs that directly involves all operators (public bodies, anglers, citizens, tourists, etc.) also through awareness-raising and environmental education actions. The project is funded within the framework of the Interreg Italia-Malta 2014-2020 Programme and runs till May 2023. The Għajnsielem Local Council is a partner in the project, which is coordinated by the Comune di Favignana (Egadian Islands) and which also sees the participation of the Għarb Local Council besides two other Sicilian partners (Island of Ustica and the Department of Mediterranean Fisheries – Sicily Region).



# MARINE PROTECTED AREAS AND ARTISANAL FISHING

## AMPPA PROJECT

INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND EDUCATION





## Għajnsielem - Your gateway to Gozo!

The locality of Għajnsielem is the first port of call when one disembarks on the island of Gozo given that it houses the Mgarr ferry harbour. Għajnsielem means 'Hain Salem' or 'Għajn' (spring of) and 'Is-sliem' (peace). This name refers to a natural spring which used to supply water, and subsequently modified and reconstructed by Grand Master Raymond Perellos in 1700 when he built an arcade containing nine washing basins bestowed its name to the village. The spring is situated in 'Pjazza tad-Dehra' where a monument in this square honours Anġlu Grech, a farmer who, according to tradition, had a vision from the Blessed Virgin Mary requesting him to build a church. A church in honour of Our Lady of Loreto was built by 1820 and it still stands. It became a parish church 1855. In 1924, Għajnsielem built a new parish church built in gothic style architecture. The coastline of Għajnsielem is extensive, stretching all the way to the coastal tower of Mgarr ix-Xini, built in response to the most nefarious and infamous Turkish attacks on the Gozitan populace way back in 1551. Within such a coastal stretch, one can savour an array of geological features at Xatt l-Aħmar, renowned for its reddish hue courtesy of the clay slopes tumbling down from beneath Fort Chambray and its two, minute pocket beaches as well as the shallow reefs and indented coast at Ras il-Hobz. Comino, a small island measuring 3.5 square kilometres and a shoreline of 7.5km is also part of Għajnsielem. Together with its smaller islets the sea around Comino is a Natura 2000 Marine Protected area.

## Xatt l-Aħmar - A geologist's and botanist's delight!

Tucked away in the south-east coastal corner of the island of Gozo, a stone's throw from the busy Mgarr Harbour, is Xatt l-Aħmar which owes its name to the reddish hue of its soils, the clay slopes overlooking it and the two sandy enclaves which it contains. The imposing Fort Chambray was built in the mid-18th century by the Order of Saint John, in an area known as Ras it-Tafal, between the port of Mgarr and Xatt l-Aħmar. A carpet of chequered fields, a hallmark of intensive agriculture, characterises the slopes leading down to the Xatt l-Aħmar coastal area. The coastline at Xatt l-Aħmar is a microcosm of different geomorphological formations, ranging from eroding clay slopes and limestone cliffs to wave-cut platforms, pocket beaches and boulder scree, with such formations juxtaposed within a secluded corner of the island of Gozo. The two small pocket beaches on site are backed by the rare sand dune habitat ('għaram tar-ramel' in Maltese) which constitutes a refuge for a number of sand dune plants that are under threat in other parts of the Maltese Islands. These include the purple spurge (*Euphorbia peplis*), the sea holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) and the sea knotgrass (*Polygonum maritimum*) that were formerly much more widely distributed in the Maltese Islands but which are currently restricted to Xatt l-Aħmar and, at most, to two or three other beaches. Some dune plants are hanging on by an even finer thread. For instance, cottonweed (*Otanthus maritimus*), which was formerly known from a number of beaches in the Maltese Islands, has virtually disappeared and was only re-discovered at Xatt l-Aħmar as recently as 2008 (Tabone, 2008). These rare dune species are interspersed at Xatt l-Aħmar with more frequently occurring halophytic plants such as the prickly saltwort (*Salsola soda*) and sea-rocket (*Cakile maritimum*). The lack of vehicular accessibility has largely shielded the enclave from mass tourism and its impacts.



## An underwater patrimony to cherish

The coastal waters lapping the shores of the locality of Għajnsielem are endowed with a diverse array of submerged habitats and species, which form a veritable mosaic of inter-dependent components. For instance, the sheer cliffs tumbling into the sea as well as shaded aspects of boulders are colonised by shade-loving communities of brightly-coloured corals, bryozoans ('false coral'), encrusting coralline algae, sponges and tube-worms, described by biologists as coralligenous assemblages. Well-lit shallow areas are colonised by communities dominated by green and brown algae, including protected *Cystoseira* species, whose presence is indicative of good water quality, the peacock's tail alga as well as the unmistakable air-filled 'berries' of the Sargassum brown alga. Extensive seabed areas are colonised by shimmering sand as well as by accumulations of cobbles and pebbles. But the real protagonist within the waters around Għajnsielem are the Neptune Grass (*Posidonia oceanica* – 'alka' in Maltese) seagrass meadows which play a pivotal, keystone role in marine ecosystems through the variety of services they provide. For instance, the same meadows act as nurseries and as refuges for a number of fish species, are colonised by a number of epiphytic species, serve to stabilise and to protect the seabed against storm action, oxygenate the water through photosynthesis and filter the water out of particulates, keeping it crystal clear.

Although moulded and engineered by man, the three wrecks scuttled off the coast of Ras il-Hobz are proxies for artificial reefs given that they serve as de facto nursery areas and refuges for a mesmerizing diversity of fish and of benthic species, effectively bolstering the biodiversity of the same waters.



## Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) Under the limelight

Despite their minute terrestrial dimensions, the Maltese Islands manage a disproportionately large marine area. The territorial waters of the Maltese Islands, in fact, stretch for 14 times the terrestrial extent of the islands, whilst the Fisheries Management Zone (FMZ), which extends for 25 nautical miles from shore, extends for almost 40 times the size of the islands. In order to safeguard the submerged assets held by the same waters, Malta has designed a total of 18 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which collectively extend for over 4000km<sup>2</sup>. The waters around Comino as well as those at Mgarr ix-Xini are two examples of these MPAs.