

The Rubble Trouble?



Snakes, hedgehogs and snails are up in arms! The rubble walls that provided a safe haven came rain or shine are now in a steady decline. An area behind the Riviera Hotel in Marfa is a case in point.

The area once a garigue habitat is now a mismatched eyesore with a patchwork of fields with different coloured soil brought over from different locations, and even debris from nearby quarries.

To replace the rubble walls the farmer has alternated between planting



and surrounding his land with globigerina limestone blocks, and in some places there isn't even anything to cover or protect the soil from the frequent strong winds and heavy rainfall because the soil is level with the boundary wall itself. When it rains one can see a distinct trail of reddish brown water oozing from



the naked field and snaking down the country road. Here the greed of the owner to reclaim land for cultivation and minimize time and money by choosing not to surround his land with rubble walls is simply providing his children with a legacy of eroded land were nothing, or very little, can be cultivated.

Rubble walls have been part of our cultural heritage ever since the Arab rule and still serve for many uses. But first let's have a look at their history. They aren't only found in Malta- but in Arab countries and Sicily as well. From deduction many presume that the practice of building rubble walls was born round about the time the Arabs came to Malta. The stones used in these walls are of various shapes and sizes. They are also found to belong to the surrounding area and were used to show boundaries between one area of land and another. Due to the many cracks and crevices in these walls, when the rainy season comes, they allow excess water to pass through thus the field does not become water logged. If water logging takes place, the water in the field will take up the pore space, that is the space between the soil clumps- belonging to air, and suffocate the plants. Without the walls, water carries with it valuable topsoil. These walls, due to the many small rocks, filter and stop much of the soil from running off, usually into drains, and finally on a one way journey to the sea. These walls are also very useful for terracing fields in areas where naturally very little soil can be found due to the gradient of the land. The walls trap eroding soil and thus maximize farming space and crop yields.

A carob tree in the vicinity is providing shelter for Pietru who for more than fifty years worked his land on a higher area of the valley. As he shelled broad beans and popped them into his mouth he described how the area looked before it was suffocated with soils.

“To the untrained eye, the area looks degraded and poor because the soil is too shallow to support trees; however, pockets of soil that gathered over time in eroded depressions are very rich with organisms and I used to spend a long time marveling at the numerous species of tiny wild flowers and

insects living here. However, I miss the thyme most and in my mind I can still smell the aromatic herb and see its purple flowers when this shrub was in full bloom. Now truckloads of soil are suffocating all forms of life and destroying the area for ever.”



Pietru is determined to put a stop to more land reclamation and encourage the building of rubble walls as he is an expert in this trade. He fumbled into his shirt pocket and handed me a crumpled note saying....

According to the MEPA document -The Fertile Soil (preservation) Act 1973, Figure XXIX *“No person may transport soil to any site for any purpose in larger quantities than one half cubic metre without permission from the Director of Agriculture.”*

Witnessing such enthusiasm from a seventy year old inspired me to take the matter a step further and I told Pietru that I will be exposing this irresponsible behavior by writing and posting pictures in the media to highlight the importance of the natural Maltese Sclerophyll habitats and building and preserving rubble walls. Pietru handed me a handful of broad beans as a token of friendship and rounded up all we talked about in one sentence...‘Greed is depriving future generations from the simple and beautiful things in life’.

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