

# Marsaxlokk Fishing Port & its local Fishing Community –Maritime Heritage and Practices in Times of Change

Many tourists visit the various seaside destinations located along the coasts of the Mediterranean every summer. Many of these places existed in the past as fishing villages, including Marsaxlokk in Malta, which today is mentioned in the tourist guides as one of Malta's attractions offering local colour and history. In Malta, and particularly in Marsaxlokk (a fishing village and the largest fishing harbour of Malta), fishing has always been an integral part of the inhabitants' life. Still today, the Maltese fisheries are considered a type of Mediterranean artisanal activity, operating multi-species and multi-gear fisheries, with fishers switching from one gear to another several times a year, according to the fishing season. However, the tourist and economic climate of the village is different from other seaside places we know in the Mediterranean. Traditional fishing is dying out, and many artisanal fishermen decide to resort to making money on the side as water taxis. This is caused by the fatigue of long hours spent at sea, together with difficulties that did not exist in the past in this territory: ecological problems like climate change, marine pollution and overfishing. These local and regional problems- that other fishing communities in the EU are facing and dealing with- do not encourage the young generation to follow their parents' way of life. The paper presents the process that the fishermen of Marsaxlokk are undergoing in the context of social-economic change and tourists-fishermen relations, and examines if the people there still practice the old ways of life that characterize fishermen communities or if they have adopted a more commercial approach, such as keeping themselves on the tourists' destinations maps and finding alternative or additional ways of living.

**Keywords:** coastal development, Fishers communities, Malta, the Mediterranean, tourism

## Expressing Maritime Heritage

Samuel Baker, in an interesting insight into words, places and narrations related to sea (2010, 5-6), distinguishes "marine" from "maritime", providing some useful notes for the present excursus on heritage. In fact, if "marine" designates "what pertains to the sea in its independent nature", "maritimer" can be usefully understood as including the marine on one hand and the nautical on the other", thus implying that the domain of the maritime is "fluid" and "expansive", referring to a condition more than a region, to an attitude and even a structure of feeling, where nature and society overlap.

Maritime heritage exists wherever there is a sea and a community of people connected to it. We find maritime heritage in port cities, towns or villages near lakes or water sources and in places in which people find their living from the sea.

Alegret and Carbonell (2014, 9), divide maritime heritage into three categories, and their blend makes the concept and practice of today's maritime heritage.

- Underwater heritage 1
- Floating heritage 2
- Maritime cultural heritage 3

A further specification refers to tangible and intangible aspects of maritime heritage. 4

Tangible Maritime Heritage refers to various concrete and symbolic landscapes, coastal infrastructures, crafts - including all kinds of ships, shipwrecks, fishing and diving gear, historical documents and material culture of daily life in the coastal communities. 5 6 7 8 9 10

Intangible maritime heritage has to do with cultural heritage as properly connected to people through languages, techniques and skills, rituals, music and festivals related to the sea, as well as stories, legends, local myths and memories of the local marine community (Alegret and Carbonell, *ibid* 14-15). We can find tracks of maritime heritage also in literature, art, and in the landscape design. 11 12 13 14 15 16

Stephan Daniels, in his article: 'Place and its Geographical Imagination' (1992), checks the terms related to the word 'place' as concept, from geographical and sociological view; terms as: locality, landscape and region are components which are part of the circle that makes the idea of a place to what it is. For Daniels, the identity 17 18 19 20 21

of a place is not limited to local knowledge, it is also affected by nation-state boundaries, now opened to allow external influences which is an expression of the modernization dynamics and the social and economic flows. 22 23 24

Lévy (2014) refers to the importance of a place in his analysis of the terms space and spatiality. According to him, the social factor transfers the place into a collective societal reality. He presents places as environments and actors. In this reality, places need to demonstrate their capacity, and it can be done if the multiple actors in it will be unified. 25 26 27 28 29

Focusing back on coastal and marine localities, Boissevain and Selwyn (2004, 12) point out the difference (or duality) between the physical aspects of land and landscape (i.e. tangible) and the ideas about the land – those who shape the spirit of a place. These ideas could be represented by images, myths, sets of concepts and cultural perspectives. To distinguish between and understand this kind of land and landscape duality, we must meet the routes, paths and structures of the land, and to be informed regarding its history, culture, ideology and its imagined realm, reflected by the elements it is made of, like: "pastoral paintings and poetry, tourist brochures, post-cards, and the discourses of estate agents, politicians, and environmentalists", can all be parts of this duality. 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40

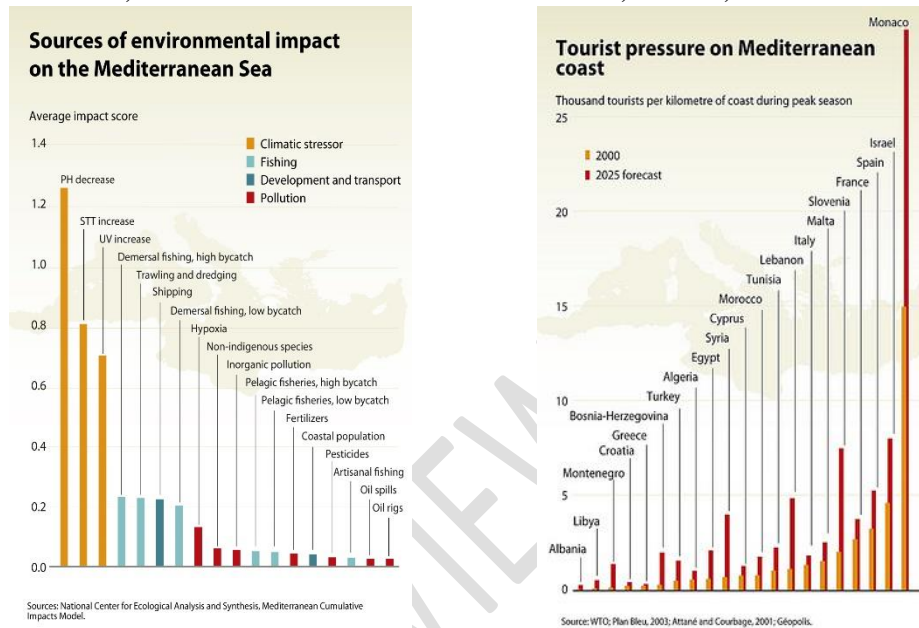
## **The Coastal Development in the Mediterranean Basin**

Alegret and Carbonell in their "Revisiting the Coast; New Practices in Maritime Heritage" (2014), and in an early publication from 2004 – "Contesting the Foreshore; Tourism, Society, and Politics on the Coast" (Boissevain and Selwyn, Eds.) deal with the rapid development of coastal 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48

environments and the efforts to preserve marine traditions, whilst also taking into consideration the role of tourism within these landscapes.

Alegret and Carbonell (ibid., 7) raise a concern about the seafaring activities and fishing communities, whose traditional ways of life might be at risk due to the numerous modernization processes that are rapidly and consistently changing their habitat. The aim, therefore, is to protect both maritime heritage and the environment from human intervention and activities.

**Figure 1 and Figure 2.** *State of the Mediterranean Marine and Coastal Environment, UNEP/MAP – Barcelona Convention, Athens, 2012*

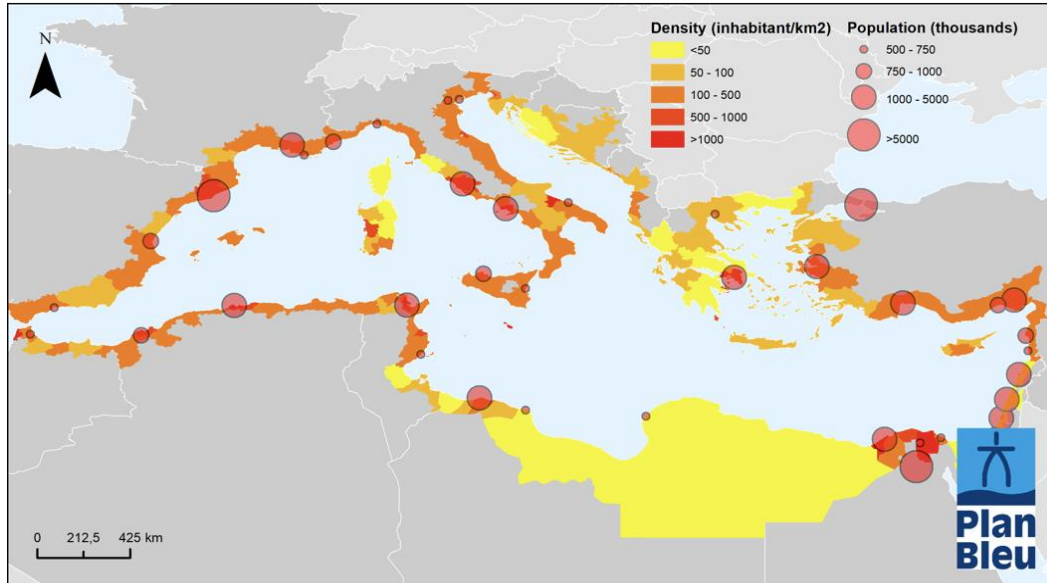


Source: UNEP/MAP.

Tom Selwyn (ibid, 2) indicates several factors that are part of the transformation which coastal communities are currently experiencing:

- The development of tourism, which has played a role of great importance in the process of changing coastal economies from semi-feudal societies into capitalistic societies.
- A decline in the influence of traditional landowners (both local and absentee) and the growing influence of joint development companies, banks, and foreign tour operators
- Demographic consequences, which include the movement of indigenous populations to the coasts, and migration to coastal resorts by hotel staff and other workers as a result of the expanding tourist industry

**Figure 3.** *Population: Density of the Coastal Regions and Major Coastal Cities (More Than 500 000 Inhabitants)*



Source: Barcelona Convention: Mediterranean 2017 Quality Status Report.

### The Unique Environment that Fishers Belong to & the Fishing Sector

As mentioned in the FAO's (Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN) publication concerning maritime societies, and regarding fisheries laws and institutions in the Western Mediterranean (Féral, 2004:3, FAO Fisheries Technical Paper No. 420), fishing communities are a phenomenon – a historical as well as socio-economical phenomenon- that has existed in the Mediterranean Basin for centuries.

The connection to nature and the natural local environment of the fishermen, is another highly appreciated factor, mentioned in many papers, which today is linked (together with traditional fishing techniques) to a specific type of local place-oriented heritage. Féral, in his paper (ibid), highlights the unique environment that fishermen belong to by mentioning the name given to the spaces they inhabit: the "**marine burghs**". This term refers to the dense settlements of fisher families and their professional locations. The term includes within its definition domestic housing for the families, as well as areas relegated to the protection and landing of vessels, the storing, maintenance and repair of nets, and the sale, storage and packaging of the catch.

In their article "The role of fishing material culture in communities" sense of place as an added-value in management of coastal areas" (2016), Sorna Khakzad and David Griffith refer to the importance of place and place attachments, when discussing the natural environments of fishing communities. They claim that place attachments are connections to certain physical and social settings, which give the place its special character. Khakzad and Griffith identify three components that define a place: physical form, activity, and meaning. According to them, fish are not only a primary source of making a living, but also play an important role as multiple ecological- socio-cultural-

economic components in fishermen's lives, and thus contribute to the creation of sense of place, its identity and pride.

Urquhart and Acott remind us (2014) that, besides the social attachments that bond people to places, the physical environment and landscape also have an effect on the sense of place. However, place identity is not static, but rather fluid, changing over time due to the relations between the physical environment and social constructions.

From sense of a place to the practical aspects: the fisheries industry has provided jobs in the EU for about 178,000 people in 2016.

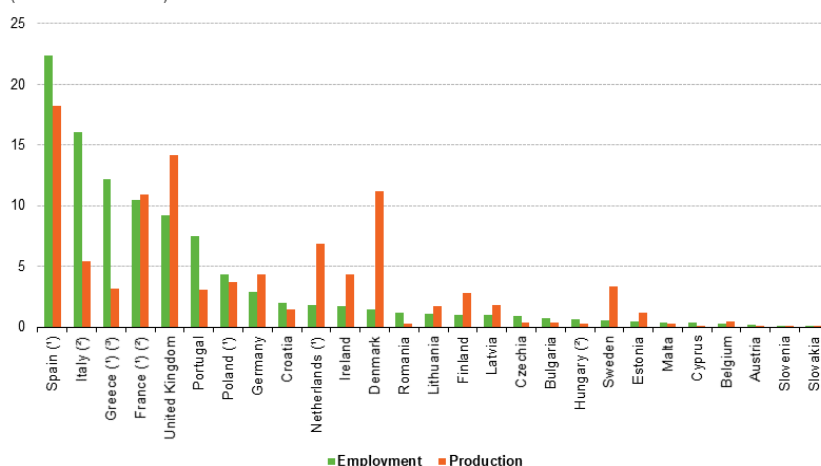
In several EU regions, the fishing sector plays a crucial role in relation to employment and economic activity: in some European coastal communities, as many as half the local jobs are in the fishing sector.

Spain alone accounts for a quarter of the total employment, and the four countries with the highest employment levels (Spain, Italy, Greece and France) make up around 65% of the total.

Fleet capacity management is an essential tool for the sustainable exploitation of fisheries resources, which is one of the main objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy.

**Figure 4. Production and Employment in the EU Fisheries Industry, 2016**

Production and employment in the EU fisheries industry, 2016  
(% share of EU-28 totals)



(\*) Provisional employment figures.

(\*) 2015 data instead of 2016 for aquaculture.

(\*) Catch data for Mediterranean and Black Sea and Western Indian Ocean only, 2015.

Source: Eurostat (online data codes: nama\_10\_a64\_e, fish\_ca\_main, fish\_aq\_q and fish\_aq2a)

eurostat

Source: Eurostat.

The European Union is aware of the importance of the sustainability of fish resources and the need to carefully and collectively manage fish stocks, as a renewable resource (Eurostat: Agriculture, forestry and fisheries statistics introduced, Fishery statistics). One of the results of this understanding was a reform of the Common Fishing Policy (CFP), which was presented in July 2011 and became effective on January 1, 2014. These are the main ideas:

- CFP is designed to conserve fish stocks and to manage them as a common resource
- it gives all European fishing fleets equal access to EU waters and fishing grounds
- It aims to ensure that the EU's fishing industry is environmentally, economically and socially sustainable, through high long-term fishing yields for all stocks (at the latest by 2020)
- Another increasingly important aim of the CFP is to reduce unwanted catches and wasteful practices to the minimum or avoid them altogether (Eurostat: Agriculture, forestry and fisheries statistics)

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The EU fishing fleet is very diverse, with vessels ranging from under six meters to over 75. Under the EU law, the total capacity of the fishing fleet may not be increased, and any decommissioning of vessels or reduction of fleet capacity obtained through public support must be permanent. For the last 20 years, the EU fishing fleet capacity has declined in terms of both tonnage and engine power. Despite the expansion of the EU, the number of EU vessels in 2016 numbered 83,734 – a figure which decreased by 1,707 vessels since 2008 (European Commission, Facts and Figures on the Common Fisheries Policy, 2016).

### **Maritime Heritage in Malta**

Malta, due to its unique location in the Mediterranean, has been throughout the ages not only a strategic base for foreign powers, but also a port of call for intellectual travelers, artists and sailors (both really existed and fictional).

From Guido Lanfranco (2015, 197, 206-207), we learn that fishermen in Malta, especially the experienced ones in the area of Marsaxlokk, have their own sea stories and legends, based on their beliefs and experiences at sea. The source of these stories is naturally the living space, where people live in close proximity to the sea. As a result, these surroundings transform a place (which could be a busy port or just a shoreline) into a habitat for different customs and traditions. Due to constant contact with other communities and cultures, the local community (the fisheries community in this case) continued to change and adapt according to external physical, political and cultural influences. The folklore stories are based on the memories and experiences accumulated while sailing, as well as the uncommon experiences, "exceptional hauls, accidents at sea, drowning, miraculous survivals and the unexplained" (ibid., 206).

In this context of Maltese craft and equipment, Chircop (2010) highlights the fact that the fishers do use a high value fishing gear, as substantial investment was beyond the ability of most fisher-folk, given their generally low incomes. Chircop refers to the luzzu or kajjik, which were (and still are) usually made locally on the island. Buying a boat of this kind is not something most fishers afford, and this also applies to the necessary maintenance and repair of a boat – a significant source of financial burden for boat owners. The

result (and the local fisheries reality) is that Maltese fishers were forced to limit themselves in regard to their fishing area: to be satisfied with the short-term fishing of pelagic fish on their traditional sailing boats, unable to increase in any substantial way their usually modest catches. In consequence, very large catches of fish were rare.

### **The Case Study of Marsaxlokk - Malta**

Many tourists visit the various seaside destinations located along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea every summer. Many of these places existed in the past as fishing villages, including Marsaxlokk in Malta which today (with its popular Sunday fish market) is mentioned in the tourist guides as one of Malta's attractions offering local colour and history. A very concrete example of maritime heritage, Marsaxlokk market combines specific lores of a fishery tradition and the new reality of a tourist attraction

Marsaxlokk is a village located in Marsaxlokk Bay, southeast of Valletta. The meaning of the name: *marsa* means "harbour" in Maltese, and *xlokk* is a southeastern wind.

The beginning of the settlement of the village dates back to the time of the Phoenicians, who used the bay as a haven for their ships. During the time of the Knights, Marsaxlokk also served as an important location, as it was the first landing place of the Turkish fleet in the Great Siege of Malta in 1565. An important structure, which is still part of the island's navy heritage, is the fortress of Fort San Lucjan – built in the early 17th century - and whose garrison repulsed a later Turkish landing attempt in 1614. Other ruins and fortifications include the extended 18th-century fortifications; the French forces disembarked at Marsaxlokk in 1798.

As for the present day, Marsaxlokk is a fishing village and is the largest fishing harbour of Malta. In 1988, the Malta Freeport was established to develop the Marsaxlokk port into a regional transshipment centre, linking it with a network of Mediterranean and Black Sea ports. However, although it functions as a fishing village, its tourist and economic climate is different from other seaside places, in which only few fishermen's boats still bring the daily catch, and the town's people have other job activities, some related to the tourism industry.

### **A Different Situation: the Resisting Traditional Fishing**

In Marsaxlokk, the situation is in fact different. In an interview published in the Times of Malta (Borg: Fishermen on the brink, 01 October 2017), we have the testimony of veteran fisherman Martin Caruana. According to him:

*"traditional fishing is dying out, and many artisanal fishermen are having to resort to making money on the side as water taxis, ferrying tourists around the bay and to St Peter's Pool."*

This is due to ecological problems such a climate change, marine pollution and overfishing: problems that other fishing communities in the EU are facing and dealing with.

Environmental concerns appear also in a **Policy statement of the European Parliament** that focuses on small-scale fisheries and "Blue-Growth" in the EU (Stobberup et al., 2017). In the context of the ecosystem perspective, positive environmental effects are mentioned as most evident in relation to climate change mitigation through the increasing use of alternative marine energy sources. Yet, a concern is still expressed regarding the environmental effects that impact on coastal communities that depend heavily on artisanal fishing.

From the point of view of European Union regulations and plans of action, Malta's Operational Program (OP) covers five out of the six "Union Priorities" defined in the EMFF (European Maritime and Fisheries Fund):

1. promoting environmentally sustainable, resource efficient, innovative, competitive and knowledge-based fisheries;
  2. fostering environmentally sustainable, resource-efficient, innovative, competitive and knowledge-based aquaculture;
  3. fostering the implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP);
  4. increasing employment and territorial cohesion;
  5. fostering marketing and processing; fostering the implementation of the Integrated Maritime Policy
- (EMFF Country files/Malta, European Commission, Operational Programs 2014-2020)

### Some Concerns about Tourism

Although the claim is that tourism provides alternative and additional livelihood sources, in reality, the fishing community/tourism interaction has both positive and negative aspects. Markwick (1999) mentions Vella, who notes in the development plan for southern Malta (an unpublished paper, 1998) that the local community benefits only marginally from tourism. As for the specific area of Marsaxlokk, several concerns have been raised regarding the negative effects of tourism there. These effects include congestion, littering and intrusions into community life, among others. Most of the benefits of cultural tourism growth mainly relate to catering establishments or the unregulated open-air market, which is not operated by inhabitants of the village and has little to do with the local community way of life. In addition, following Urry's theory of the Tourist Gaze, there is no balance between the needs of Malta's local inhabitants and the tourists' demands regarding the area's utilization, as the Maltese use of ideas about leisure and community space is distinctly different from those of tourists (Markwick, *ibid.*).



## Challenges and Difficulties

A recent article by Said, MacMillan, Schembri and Tzanopoulos (2017) examined the effects of marine protected areas on the future of the Maltese artisanal fleet. In the article, they mentioned several conflicts that exist between the different uses such as aquaculture and tourism, aquaculture and the environment, and multiple-use marine conflicts. It seems that the Maltese artisanal fleet is not always considered as an independent sector included in development plans. As shown by Said et al. (ibid.), the small-scale fishing sector was a 'missing layer' in a recent national report that focused on Malta's spatial plans for sustainability and the environment, in the national government's plans for integrated coastal zone management and marine spatial planning.

Said et al. argue (ibid.) that the fishing sector (small-scale fishing activity within the inshore zone) - unlike other maritime realms like shipping, bunkering, diving, aquaculture, swimming and marine conservation, which are officially well-represented on the national map - is not spatially recognized by national and/or supranational legislative frameworks. Although the EU Mediterranean Regulation provides recognition of these activities, the Maltese government is not obliged to designate specific boundaries for the small-scale fisheries. The result is that fishers remain unprotected against the proliferation of uses and risks emanating from new forms of seabed uses (Said et al.).

Thus, Maltese fishers are consequently facing challenges (and difficulties), which include international regulations, competition over fishing zones and decreasing fish catches, issues which did not exist in the past. The latter issue is an especially sensitive one, as it reflects both economic and environmental problems.

Specifically, along the Maltese coast, fishermen have raised claims about marine pollution, caused by various industries such as the Freeport, power station operations, and the installation of sewage outflow and spoil dump systems, since these have, according to fishers, affected fish stock productivity (Said et al., 2017.).

As Randon concludes in his chapter "Evolution of Fishing Methods" (2015, 194), *"artisanal fishing in Malta is stable and seasonal, and for this reason it is sustainable. (...) Continuous monitoring of fish stocks between countries, with the versatility of being able to increase and decrease, according to need, the number of fishing vessels employed in particular fishing techniques, could result in a more sustainable type of fishing. Reducing costs, (...) improving environmental standards will also contribute to an increase in fish stocks."*

In an interview held in January 2017 with Joseph Zahara, manager of the National Fishing Co-operative ('Dar is-Sajjida') in Marsaxlokk, he spoke about the past and the present day of the fishery community in Marsaxlokk. The identity of a man as a fisherman – he says – is not something that can be easily changed. Once a fisherman is in his 40s and 50s, the role fishing plays in his life as an occupation cannot be easily changed. In the narrow streets surrounding the harbors area, the traditional artisanal workshops continue to

operate, where the building of the luzzu and kajjik boats is still carried out (as can be seen in the photos below, taken in a boat workshop in Birgu).

The long hours spent at sea, together with difficulties that did not exist in the past in this territory- such as EU fishing regulations, including some serious environmental problems like the power station that was built in the port in 1989- do not encourage the young generation to follow their parents' way of life. This is the reason why today, in Marsaxlokk, the local fishermen employ workers from Indonesia and Egypt.

Swordfish, Blue-Finn tuna, snappers, skates, dogfish and the lampoka (a dolphin fish) are mentioned by Zahara as types of fish that are caught in Maltese territory. He adds that, even today, 90% of the fishers' population is illiterate. When going out to sea, there is minimal use of technological equipment, such as an automatic pilot on the boat, and, interestingly, most of the fishers manage to keep up with modern changes even without knowing how to read and write.

During the interview with Joseph Zahara, the subject of tourism was raised. From the commercial perspective of the area of Marsaxlokk, tourists are welcome (although the majority of tourists in Marsaxlokk is usually limited to the high season, which begins in May), but they are not part of the place's fishing activities. In Marsaxlokk Port, the boats are used solely for the fishermen's needs – no fishing activities or sailing activities are offered to tourists. However, the local community still reaps benefits from the tourist trade – primarily the restaurant owners and market merchants, who sell souvenirs, clothing, sweets and fish.

In this context, we can refer to G. Maus' article about landscapes of memory and the practice theory approach to geographies of memory (2015), in order to more precisely understand the association of the Maltese communities' landscape regarding its present situation. In the article, Maus highlights two issues: the first is whether the analysis of memory should be based on material or spatial markers of memory or on the social practice(s) of remembering. The second issue is about conceptualizations of memory – and the question raised here about how to refer to memory: either as an individual property or as a collective phenomenon. Group identities, power relations and memory – in fact each has its own spatial place associated with the places of memory.

As we have seen before, in the Maltese territory the 'physical' aspect of the landscape (i.e., the material, physical, tangible practices and heritage) is stronger than the intangible ways of life of the Maltese fishers. According to Maus' approach (ibid.), we can consider landscape as a "*topographic cutting from the world that exists and is perceived only in the conduct of social practices centered on vision*". Maus's argument is that the notion of landscape can be replaced with practices that are centered on place-specific representations of the past, and which belong to the localized memory.

At this point, we can return to O'Keeffe (ibid., 5-6), in order to understand more about the relationship between history and memory, how it influences the Maltese fisher community, and the way their history can be presented today. According to O'Keeffe, the past can be reconstructed by sculpting idealized collective / collected memories from raw historical material. The landscape is the "thing" that stands between the history and the past. With this "touchstone",

as defined by O’Keeffe (ibid.), the landscape is used for remembering both visual-factual and sensory-emotional acts. This combination of landscape and memory is accompanied by the study of tangible, visual, aides de mémoire within landscapes. Regarding the study’s practical use, O’Keeffe mentions that a number of scholars have mapped the ways in which personal memories have been reshaped into collective memories by forms of political intervention in Western capitalist landscapes, particularly through ‘official’ acts and objects of commemoration.

## Planning for the Future and Suggested Solutions

In their recent article, Azzopardi and Nash (2016) mentioned Malta’s uniqueness as a tourist destination. In explaining the factors that determine Tourism Destination Competitiveness (TDC), they refer to the special situation of Malta, considered a typical Mediterranean island destination based on mass tourism. However, there is one feature that differentiates Malta from other Mediterranean and holiday "Sea-Sand-Sun" destinations – the character of the island’s cultural and historical heritage, alongside the sea.

In this way, as the sea is a crucial element when evaluating a place’s environment, cultural tourism may contribute to the livelihood of the local inhabitants. As noted by Boissevain (1996, 9), cultural tourism is not seasonal; therefore, seaside tourist destinations may benefit from it and improve the inhabitants’ workload balance between high-season and low-season tourist activities.

This approach is supported by Farnet: in an article that reviews the ways fisheries are linked to the tourism economies (Farnet Magazine No. 9, 2013, 4), the authors observe that the fisheries industry – due to its characteristics – can be easily adapted to fit the developing demands of tourists. Many tourists are in fact no longer satisfied with "Sea & Sun holidays" and are looking for additional activities and experiences. The fisheries in seaside destinations can provide a solution for these demands, because they are located "strategically" near the waterside and the beaches, offering an unspoiled, natural and traditional environment, a package of diverse activities and a rich cultural heritage linked to fishing. In this way, fishermen and their families – the local actors - can improve their lives through cooperative work and by providing services to the tourists. As mentioned above, this process will create additional income (extra revenue) that will eventually narrow the gap between high-season and low-season activities (Farnet Magazine, Ibid.).

With having in mind the following approaches that need to be considered to maintain and overcome the challenges, we dare to suggest some solutions within the framework of cultural tourism:

1. Long-term, stakeholder-involved planning: long-term planning
2. Empowerment of the local community and culture: Community-Based Tourism (CBT)
3. Environmental management
4. Visitor management: which is required to ensure island sustainability

5. Knowledge and information systems: help island to market its tourism products and also to manage tourist resources
6. Accessibility and transportation: various transportation modes (to the island and on the island)

The identity of the local community of Marsaxlokk is deeply rooted in the fishing port, the place's natural landscape and habitat from the past. The success of the future development of the fishing village heavily relies on preserving the intangible maritime heritage - through the ongoing cooperation of the united local community, together with national efforts to make Marsaxlokk's story into a present and a future attraction.

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