

Sea Sense

immerse your senses

Editorial

**Presenting this
new e-newsletter
project**

Up Close and Personal
The John Dory

Did you know...
**What is the
colour of the
sea?**

Sustainability
**Octopus
The Ocean's
Clever Artist**

Photo credit: Veronica Busuttil

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Editorial - Welcome to Sea Sense!

Welcome to the e-newsletter Sea Sense a periodic publication by Baħar Wieħed - a new NGO being set up to spread knowledge about the sea around us.

This publication is intended to fuel your curiosity about what lies beneath the surface of our beautiful sea which Malta is blessed to be surrounded with - a world full of vibrant colour, life and amazing creatures and ecosystems which we still know very little about and is so often taken for granted.

Not many of us have the privilege of exploring and visiting this world yet our daily actions have a profound effect of what is happening under that surface. The aim of this publication is to open a small window to the beauty that lies thereunder, to instigate your curiosity and learn how vital the sea is for our own survival. We hope it will also encourage you to learn why, how and with whom we can act together, to allow life at sea to flourish.

We hope that through understanding we can appreciate the sea more and learn protect it.

Enjoy!

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Photo: Edward Sultana

Cover Photo : Veronica Busuttil

The Octopus: The Ocean's Clever Artist

The common octopus (*Octopus vulgaris*) is one of the sea's most extraordinary inhabitants, beautiful and intelligent. Recent increase in consumption of Octopus also means it is also one of the region's most heavily exploited marine animals. Unfortunately it is becoming more evident that the Octopus population around Malta is rapidly declining with less sightings being reported by snorkellers and divers alike .



Photo: David Agius

What makes Octopus so special ?

Octopi have various characteristics that make them stand out compared to other animals. The most known is its colour-changing skin that allows it to camouflage with surrounding environment. Colour changes also serve as a form of communication to convey aggression, mating readiness, or to signal retreat, particularly during confrontations.

Octopi have not one but three hearts that pump blue, copper-based blood. Octopi have a soft, boneless body that allows them to squeeze through any gap larger than its beak. But octopi are also very intelligent with an ability to solve problems, use tools and exhibit individual personality. Various scientific studies have shown that octopuses feel pain and pleasure. It led to them being recognized as "sentient beings" in the UK's Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022.

In short, the octopus is a truly remarkable creature.

Food for Thought

Cooked octopus has a distinctive taste and many of us love it either when in stews, with pasta or in a salad. It is found on the menus of most restaurants especially in the summer months and is popular with both locals and tourists alike. Due to such high demand, too many octopus are being caught and the sizes of the catches being smaller and younger. We are overfishing the Octopus: we are not allowing it to reproduce at the same rate as it is being consumed.



Photos: David
Agius



The Maltese NGO Fish4Tomorrow, in its Quick Fish Guide classifies local octopus as “Eat with Caution” (yellow rating). However, heavy fishing mean stocks are under stress. Over the past two decades, local divers have noted a dramatic decline in sightings. A sighting of Octopus whilst once common , sadly has now become a rarity. Globally, octopus warrants a Red Rating meaning to Avoid. Octopus are often sold directly by fishermen which makes it difficult to quantify how many and the size of octopus being caught in Malta. This lack of data does not help in implementing policies to protect this species.

Legal Framework

Under the local (S.L.425.01) and EU fishing regulations:

1. There is no closed season for octopus in Malta.
2. Recreational fishermen may use hand collection, hook-and-line, or a short spear without a license when fishing from the shore.
3. Commercial pot fishing requires a license from the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture.
4. There is no minimum size of Octopus that can be caught

Practical Recommendations

There are many things one can do to protect this species

1. Observe a closed season (ideally May–August) for all types of octopus fishing and consumption. During this period octopus are reproducing and the female looks after their eggs without ever leaving her den not even to eat. Removing a brooding female eliminates not only her but also up to 200,000 potential baby octopus.
2. Remove discarded fishing pots as they continue to catch octopus and other fish indiscriminately.
3. Release any octopus under 750 g.
4. Support the introduction of a national quota of Octopus caught.
5. Reduce demand for octopus by consuming less regularly.
6. Protect the areas which are known as breeding grounds
7. Report illegal activities. If you see young juvenile specimen being caught, illegal fishing methods, fishing in protected areas or other suspicious activity, report it to the authorities (Malta Sea Ranger Unit, ERA or Fisheries Dept)



Photo: David Agius

Conclusion:

With relatively modest changes such a seasonal closure, size limitations, and moderated demand — this remarkable animal can thrive again in local waters. It is in everyone's interest, including that of fishermen, that a growing population is allowed to prosper around the Maltese islands.

The John Dory ('Zeus Faber' or 'Pixxi San Pietru')

The John Dory is one of the most distinctive fish species around the Maltese islands and in the Mediterranean sea. Known for its unusual and very distinctive form, it plays a vital role in the ecology of coastal waters. Though it moves at a particularly slow speed, its slim profile make it very hard to notice. Once spotted, its distinctive and elegant lines and relative ease amongst divers, make it a prized "catch" for underwater photographers.



Photos: Veronica Busuttil



Description

The John Dory is characterized by a very slim body with long spines on its dorsal fin and a large dark spot on each side, known as an "eye spot" or ocellus. This "eye spot" serves as a defense mechanism to confuse predators. Other fish are tricked into thinking the spot is the eye of a significantly larger animal, allowing the John Dory to avoid danger. Known also as 'St. Peter's Fish,' the tradition has it that the spots on the sides are the thumbprint of Saint Peter when he caught the fish on Jesus' instructions. The beauty of traditions! The fish also has a highly extendable jaw that allows it to catch prey. Its extremely thin body allows it to approach prey unnoticed. Its mouth then extends forward forming a tube allowing it to suck in prey. Its diet consists primarily of small fish like sardines and anchovies, but also squid, cuttlefish, and various crustaceans.

It grows to a maximum size of 65 cm and a max weight of 5 kg. with a typical lifespan of 12 years When John Dories are three or four years of age, they are ready to reproduce by releasing sperm and eggs into the water to fertilize.

Habitat

In the Mediterranean, Zeus Faber is typically found on the continental shelf at depths of 50 to 150 metres, though it can go down to depths of 400 metres. It is common across the entire Mediterranean sea. Recent increases in sea temperatures is seeing the species propagate in the Black Sea.

Around the Maltese Islands the John Dory is seen mainly see by divers in water 25 metres and deeper with most sightings occurring in the wintertime. These sightings are more likely in the South parts of the island (e.g. Wied iz Zurrieq) but occasionally also off the south coast of Gozo (e.g. Ras il Hobz) . Divers from shore tend to see smaller specimens of ca 10 to 20 cm length but specimens of up to 50 cm are not outright rare by the coast.

Further out at sea, sightings of full grown larger specimen have been reported on Historical Deep Wrecks declared as Archaeological Conservation zones at sea managed by the Underwater Cultural Unit within heritage Malta. Fishing within range of the latter sited and close to artificial reefs like the Um el Faroud is restricted and/ or outright banned through the various notices to mariners.



Fisheries and Conservation Status

No large-scale studies have been carried out on the conservation status of this species. While the John Dory is not usually the primary target of industrial fishing, it is a high-value "by-catch" in Mediterranean bottom-trawling operations. Recent Studies indicate smaller numbers are being caught in the Mediterranean and Adriatic Sea meaning a much smaller John Dory population and concern is now growing that this species is facing conservation concerns. These concerns are further exacerbated by the fish's slow growth rate and a late age of maturity. Lets hope we are graced by the presence of such a unique fish for the years to come.

What is the Colour of the sea?

Have you ever looked at the sea on a summer's day on a sandy beach and wondered why it looks transparent near the dry beach, then turns somehow to aquamarine and further out it turns blue mirroring the cloudless skies above? Yet on a grey winter day as the clouds knit together, the sea once again looks lead grey.

So what is the colour of the sea?

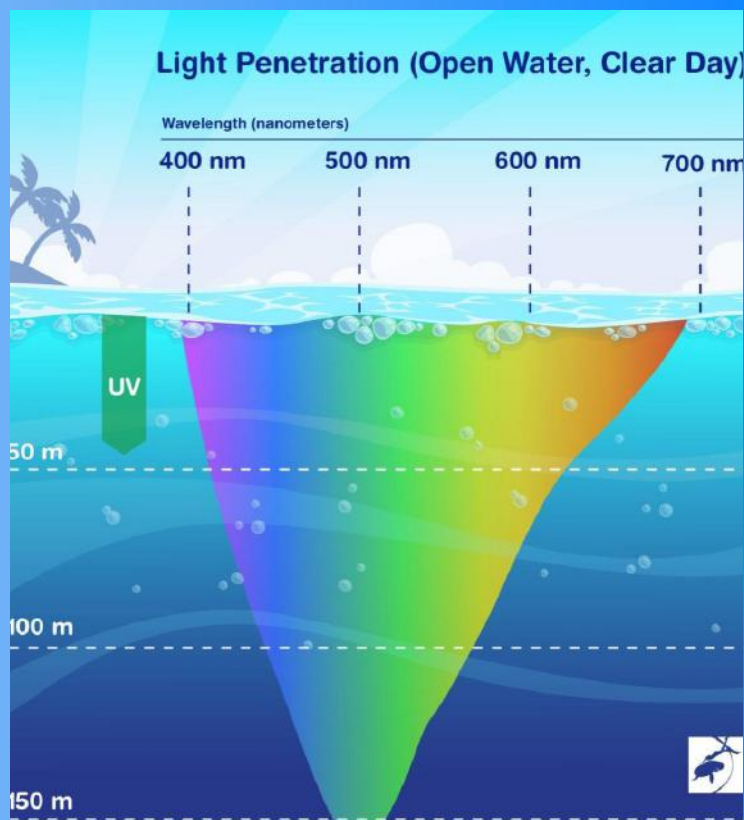
Well the answer is related to light and how the sea absorbs it!



So let's look away from the sea first and consider light. The light from the sun is white. Thanks to Sir Isaac Newton, way back in the year 1665 – that's 360 years ago, we have come to know that it actually consists of all the colours of the rainbow. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. Imagine a delicious rainbow cake covered in white cream, once cut, each slice uncovers multiple layers each with a different colour.



Each colour making white light has a different wave length with red having the longest and violet, the shortest. As light enters a large volume of water, the colours with the longest wavelength are absorbed (not reflected back to us) by the water first. Colours with shorter wavelength such as blue, are reflected back from deeper waters making the sea look blue. So this explains why while in shallow waters we can see the colourful rocky seabed yet as one dives deeper and deeper all the colours seem to fade away.



Only with a torch light can the vibrancy of the underwater mosaic become visible to us. The ocean's absorption of different wavelengths of light is the main reason why the deeper sea has a blue colour. As the sea continues to get deeper and deeper even the blue light in white light is absorbed in the water column making the sea look black.

Another factor that influences the colour of the sea is the material one finds floating in the water column. If water has a lot of plankton because the sea is rich in nutrients like in the Atlantic then the sea tends to look green. If there is a river mouth then there is a tendency for the water to be the colour of the debris (soil, leaves, litter) that the river brings into the sea.



Although different geographic locations and what is present in the water both influence the final colour we see, the overall colour of the sea is influenced by the absorption of the different fractions of natural light that is visible to us.

Perhaps that is why planet Earth is called the Blue Planet!

Events

- A Community Clean will be held at Riviera Car Park on the Saturday 10 January 2026 organised by Regjun Tramuntana together with Raniero's Adventures Live life and No to Plastic Malta w at Golden Bay . Further information can be obtained from the below link :

<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1272888328219219&set=a.231184565722939>

Citizen Science

- Elasmobranch Sighting. A citizen science campaign conducted by Sharklab-Malta. Sharklab-Malta is a Malta-based NGO working to protect elasmobranchs in Mediterranean waters. Its main objectives are to raise awareness about sharks, skates and rays, increase research efforts, and contribute to conservation on all levels. Any sightings of elasmobranchs can be registered on the below link

<https://www.sharklab-malta.org/report-a-sighting>

- The Spot the Alien and Spot the Alien Fish . Citizen science campaigns from the Oceanography Malta Research Group, Department of Geosciences University of Malta. They aim to promote the submission of reports of Non-Indigenous Species (NIS) spotted within Maltese waters by citizen scientists. The Spot the Alien Fish campaign focuses only on non-indigenous fish species, while the Spot the Alien campaign focuses on all other non-indigenous species.

<https://campaigns.ocean.mt/index.php/about/>

