

NEWS



End of the road for *The Imperial Eagle*... The former Gozo ferry was yesterday scuttled off Qawra and will now be used as an artificial reef.

Imperial Eagle bows out and finds a watery grave

Scuttled off Qawra to help eco tourism

Herman Grech

The *Imperial Eagle*, the former Gozo ferry, found a watery grave yesterday when it was scuttled at Qawra point – to the joy of divers who will soon see it transformed into an artificial reef.

The 43-metre long vessel was towed out of Marsa by two tug boats for its final voyage at 7 a.m., reaching its designated grave site about 400 metres off Qawra about three hours later, as divers prepared to down the vessel.

A number of bathers and passers by watched as the vessel was scuttled while various fishing and pleasure boats looked on. The vessel went down in 35-metres deep water after being cleaned of oil and other contaminants.

The pollution control unit was present to ensure against any spillage.

The special valves set into the vessel to ease the scuttling were opened at about midday to let the water in, and the ship finally settled on the seabed at about 1.30 p.m.

Emy Farrugia, chairman of the action committee in charge of the scuttling, said he was pleased with the way the vessel had gone down, even though “it had not rested in the best place.”

Yesterday’s scuttling was the result of four years’ work, he said. Diving schools have been asking for the scuttling of more vessels, which are known to attract hordes of fish and are very popular with divers.

Efforts by divers to inspect the *Imperial Eagle*’s resting place proved futile as the sea became relatively rough, cutting visibility drastically.

Mr Farrugia said the aim of the wreck was to promote ecotourism and create and maintain a healthy marine environment. Passage through the zone will in fact be strictly forbidden.

Mr Farrugia said he hoped the site would not be used for fishing, and augured that the wreck would soon become a marine site.

Reactions from the shore during the sinking were varied. While many made use of binoculars or even videoed the operation, some were concerned that an accident might be taking place.

“Are you sure the people on board are safe?” one bather was heard asking her friend.

The *Imperial Eagle* made its maiden voyage on June 1, 1958. It had accommodation for 70 passengers and room for 10 cars.

It remained on the Mgarr-Marfa route until March 1968, proving itself a very reliable vessel.

The vessel was used as a cargo ship between the two islands until 10 years ago.

Mr Farrugia said there would soon be wrecks in all four corners of Malta and Gozo.

He said that in seven months, the wreck of the ill-fated *Um El Faroud* at Wied iż-Żurrieq was “really doing well”, luring fish like barracuda, and had become a prime diving site.

The next vessel on the list to be scuttled is expected to be the *Xlendi*, another former Gozo ferry.

Mr Farrugia said the *Xlendi* was expected to be scuttled in an area known as *Xatt l-Ahmar*, near Chambray in Gozo.

Trading the old for the new... It took one and a half hours for *The Imperial Eagle* to make its descent to the bottom of the sea. Right: One of the Gozo Channel ferries sails past in the background.

