

# Underwater statue of Christ moved to new site out at sea

George Cini

In an operation lasting about three hours, the concrete statue of Jesus Christ lowered 10 years ago onto the seabed close to St Paul's islands was lifted out of the water and lowered again out at sea.

The new resting place is a conservation area where a wreck of the *Imperial Eagle*, a former Malta-Gozo ferry, was scuttled in July last year to form an artificial reef.

The new site is about two kilometres away from the coast and the statue now lies at a depth of 10 metres facing St Paul's islands.

The statue was moved because the clarity of water had deteriorated so much during the past 10 years that divers no longer visited this site, with the result that the statue was not being appreciated any more.

When asked, one of the divers said it was not that easy to give a definite answer as to why visibility had deteriorated but the presence of fish farms nearby was definitely one of the factors. A proper study would have to be carried out to determine the factors that led to this, he said.

The floating crane used to lift the statue and lower it again was made available by Cassar Ship Repair yard of Marsa.

The 13-ton statue of fibre glass-covered concrete was designed by the well-known sculptor Alfred Camilleri Cauchi. It had cost over Lm1,000 and was commissioned by a committee of divers led by Raniero Borg purposely set up to commemorate the Pope's visit to Malta that year.

Yesterday's operation was organised by a group of divers involved in the *Imperial Eagle* Marine Park Action Committee.

Committee chairman Emi Farrugia said a cardinal buoy would be put in place by the beginning of summer to mark this first conservation marine park.

"Two moorings have been lowered in the area so that boats ferrying divers to the area would not have to lower anchors, risking damaging the seabed or the statue.

"Fisheries consultant professor Charles Agius will be assisting our committee to introduce groupers, moray eels and other species to populate the area, which has been depleted of fish life," said Mr Farrugia.

Mr Farrugia, a professional diver



Up and away: The 13-ton concrete statue of Jesus Christ seeing the light of day after 10 years underwater close to St Paul's Islands, where the apostle Paul was shipwrecked. The statue was lowered two kilometres out at sea at the first marine conservation park in the Maltese islands. Pictures: CHRIS SANT FOURNIER

and producer of underwater documentaries, said that for marine conservation areas to flourish, spear fishing in all forms would have to be banned.

"Legislation is being drawn up to ban spear fishing and hopefully this will be approved by parliament as soon as possible.

"The two fishing cooperatives have agreed to inform their members not to fish in conservation zones," said Mr Farrugia.

Mr Farrugia said conservation areas would be demarcated by buoys so that boats would keep 50 metres away from the area to eliminate hazards to divers when they surfaced.

Tony Cassar, a director of Cassar

Ship Repair, said the company often offered assistance because these divers were promoting dive tourism and helping to make Malta more popular overseas.

Mr Farrugia said the aim of the committee he chaired was to have several marine conservation areas around the Maltese islands.

The committee has been involved in the scuttling of the *Um El Faroud* at Wied iż-Żurrieq, the former Malta Gozo ferry *Xlendi* at ix-Xatt l-Ahmar in Gozo and two tug boats outside the port at Marsas-cala.

The wrecks will serve as artificial reefs encouraging the presence of fish life and serving as land marks worth visiting.



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