



CLEANING UP THE ROCK

Situated on the tip of the Iberian Peninsula where the Mediterranean meets the Atlantic, Gibraltar – known simply as “The Rock” – not only bears witnesses to busy maritime traffic, but also to widespread effects of marine and air pollution. The Environmental Safety Group, a Clean Up the World member, has been a strong advocate for a cleaner and greener Gibraltar, working to protect the local environment and promote cross-border initiatives in the Mediterranean region.

Janet Howitt may well be Gibraltar’s very own Erin Brockovich, the now famous single mother who took on and won the case against the industries polluting the environment in the United States.

In 2002, Howitt and several other enthusiasts set up the Environmental Safety Group (ESG) in response to growing community concerns over the environmental impacts of an oil refinery and petrochemical plants located in the Bay of Gibraltar, in Spain.



Pollution from the oil refinery in the Bay of Gibraltar raised community concerns

The group has lodged a formal complaint with the European Commission against the Kingdom of Spain for creating an environmental hotspot with humanitarian and biodiversity consequences in a region that also experiences year-round maritime activity, including illegal driftnet fishing and some other unsustainable practices by the different nations located close to the Straits of Gibraltar.

Since then, the ESG has also lobbied its own government and industry to adopt more sustainable policies and practices, raising environmental awareness in the community along the way.



The ESG organised a rally on the 2006 World Environment Day

In 2003, the ESG introduced to Gibraltarians the idea of “Bucket Brigades”, a simple yet effective sampling method approved by the US Environmental Protection Agency to evaluate air pollution. The method involves using a standard five-gallon bucket to create a vacuum pressure to draw air into an airtight bag. The bag is then sealed and sent to a laboratory for running through a test which compares the sample with a library of about 100 toxic substances.

The “Bay Bucket Brigade”, forged by the ESG and made up of NGOs from both sides of the Gibraltarian-Spanish border, successfully took air samples which demonstrated that the air quality outside the refinery wall exceeded legal chemical limits

of the carcinogen benzene by a factor of 22.

“We consider it vital to administer self-help in fighting local pollution, the quality of air and water. The communities are tired of hearing that there is ‘no data to support the argument that toxic levels are being exceeded’,” says Howitt.

Having generated support within the community to its anti-pollution initiatives, the ESG decided to tackle the issue of waste in Gibraltar as many public spaces, green areas, the coast and the Bay are habitually strewn with rubbish. Besides, organisers hoped to draw the public’s attention to the lack of recycling programmes in Gibraltar, which further compounded the situation.

“It’s simply not good enough to expect others to clean up your empty drink bottle and chocolate wrapper. Apart from being an embarrassing eyesore, this litter has a negative impact on the health of the ecosystem,” explains Howitt.



Rubbish “on the rocks”

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The famous Rock of Gibraltar

“At the same time, we realise that the problem of waste is by no means confined to Gibraltar. By joining Clean Up the World, we become part of a global effort that has support from over 100 countries and more than 30 million people.”

During the 2005 Clean Up the World Weekend, the ESG decided to focus its efforts on the Upper Rock Nature Reserve – a popular tourist spot that offers spectacular views of the Straits of Gibraltar and North Morocco. Armed with gloves, litter pickers, bin liners and plenty of drinking water, ten ESG volunteers braved the swelteringly hot conditions to clean up public areas of the Reserve.



ESG Volunteers giving a fresh coat of paint to the observation point in the Upper Rock Nature Reserve

In addition to the Upper Rock clean up, a total of 300 volunteers carried out activities in twenty other sites both on land and at sea. A group of divers organised underwater clean ups, abseilers cleared rubbish accumulated on cliffs, while others were involved in the protection of endemic vegetation by clearing invasive plants. On the festive side, Clean Up the World activities included an environmental

parade involving schoolchildren, dance groups, musicians and artists.



Singing for the Environment. Outdoor concerts were organised in support of the 2005 Clean Up the World Weekend

According to Howitt, the Weekend is “very important at a personal level because it increases the sense of having control over one’s environment and of making a positive difference”.

“Hopefully, the acute litter problem in Gibraltar will be partly addressed through the reduce-reuse-recycle attitude that should follow this initiative,” she adds.

The ESG continues to press the case for the government to adopt a consolidated waste management plan for Gibraltar. The Group has also taken the national environmental agenda a step further by leading the public debate on Gibraltar’s future energy options, which has resulted in a recent government announcement to study the potential of renewable energy projects.

“There is already speculation on the Rock as to whether wind will win over



tidal energy, or whether we shall go solar... It is clear that Gibraltar has many options and must reduce its reliance on fossil fuels and CO₂ emissions, and therefore this is a solid step in the right direction,” notes Howitt.

In 2006, the ESG was among the first Clean Up the World members to join the new Clean Up the Mediterranean campaign, which seeks to promote an ecosystem approach in tackling the environmental problems of the Mediterranean region such as rapid urbanisation, soil erosion, marine pollution and water scarcity.

Howitt says: “Gibraltar is the gates of the Mediterranean, and what’s going on elsewhere in the ecosystem affects us directly. We believe that a regional approach to the environment is fundamental. Clean Up the Mediterranean is an opportunity for us to reach out to other communities in the region, share experiences and perhaps find common solutions to stop degradation of the marine and coastal environment. Together we’ll be indeed as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar.”

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