Spring Hunting; an Objective View

The following are the points raised on the 4th day of February at the Assemblea, organised by the KSU Social Policy Office, regarding the position of S-Cubed, on the topic of Spring Hunting.

Dear Chairman, Social Policy Commissioner, Members of the Social Policy Commission, fellow students,

In order to assess where the opinion of the science student population stood, the social policy office conducted a survey in which students were asked a series of three questions in order to determine whether

1. The students regarded hunting in general to be a Maltese Tradition
2. The students thought that the spring hunting derogative was sufficiently enforced
3. The students thought that the derogation should continue to be in force.

In addition, they were asked if they had any additional factors influencing their final decision, and if so, to list these factors.

The results obtained showed that well over 80% of science students were against the spring hunting derogative to continue in force. Although, this reflected the expected outcome, the additional factors influencing the students’ decision was surprising, since there seemed to be a strong lack of education on both sides of the story. A case in point is an example of a student who voted against spring hunting simply because (s)he had ‘never hunted’ before and another student who voted in favour of the spring hunting derogative to continue in force, despite the fact that (s)he did not believe that hunting was a tradition or that the derogative was sufficiently enforced. The additional factors listed, that helped in the making of the final decision were ‘the prime minister is voting in this way and therefore so will I’.

From this argument, we can say with an amount of certainty, that the case of Spring Hunting is becoming strongly politicised, and that this causes a deviation from the actual subject at hand. Therefore, as an organisation, we ask that this case be looked at objectively and that final decisions are made only after one can truly make an educated and unbiased decision, no matter what their standpoint.

First and foremost, it must be note that hunting, whether in spring or otherwise, is not the primary source of population declines. This can be attributed to agriculture. However there is significant evidence to show that hunting does cause a significant amount of damage to the quail and turtle-dove population numbers. It ‘adds salt to the wound’, so to speak.

In addition, one must keep in mind that the shooting of one bird in autumn is not equivalent to the shooting of one bird in spring. This is because birds migrating in the spring are migrating back to Europe, i.e. they have already migrated once to Africa and almost the whole way back to Europe, therefore it can be assumed, that they will survive the journey and successfully reproduce. In autumn, on the other hand, the migrating birds would have only covered a fraction of the journey ahead and are much more likely to not make it back to Europe to reproduce. As a result, the impact of shooting one bird in spring is equivalent to shooting four birds in autumn.

Some might argue that the amount of birds being shot at present is the same as the amount of birds that used to be shot in the past, when hunting wasn’t considered to be an issue to population sizes, this however, due to the very real population declines in both the turtle-dove and quail species, any damage is made all the more significant.

Hunters have, in the past argue that the route over Malta is not the major route taken by migrating quails and turtle doves. While this may be true, what they fail to realise is that, despite the fact that the Central route (i.e. the one that passes over Malta), is much smaller than the Eastern and Western routes, these three routs actually populate different areas of the European continent. Thus, even though the route is smaller, it is not insignificant since losing all the birds from the central route would result in a localised extinction over central Europe. It is interesting to note that birds cannot simply choose their route, it is built into their system from birth, and therefore a bird cannot decide which route to take, based on the likelihood of its survival.

In addition to this, it is know that there is a lack of research regarding the quails and turtle-doves of Central Europe. Over the course of campaigning for the referendum this point has been raised by those in favour of the derogative continuing in force with the argument that since the consequence is not really known, there is no harm in continuing to hunt during the spring. However, from a scientific perspective, it is much more dangerous to allow the derogative to be enforced, since there is no knowledge of the extend of the damage caused. It could be mild, but at the same time it could be devastating. Of course, it would, in this case be wise to refrain from spring hunting; hence ensuring that the damage caused to the population sizes is as minimal as possible.

A major point raised, during the conducted surveys as to why students wanted an end to spring hunting was that they sought to be able to enjoy the countryside for themselves, That, due to the activity of hunters, they were either scolded for entering the countryside because they would be ‘disrupting’ the hunters, or worse, risk getting shot. Many hunters have pointed out that they appreciate nature best, could this however, simply be because they are not allowing any other people to appreciate it?

A clear point raised from the survey was that students do not think that the derogative is sufficiently enforced. Moreover, a significant amount of evidence shows that the derogative is not enforced enough. For example, one may note how the frequency of hunter’s reports peaks towards the end of the third week. In addition to this, messages from FKNK to hunters warning them not to send an excess of reports have been found. This lack of enforcement results in the killing of several other species of birds apart from turtle-doves and quails, which the derogative allows.

One may also note that the period in which spring hunting is allowed comes right in the middle of the season, when most other animals are trying to breed. Hence even the noise from gunshots themselves results in other species being prevented from breeding. In fact, in seasons, where spring hunting was not allowed, several bird species that do not usually breed on the islands showed attempted breeding. In fact, a number of migratory species have in the past showed the tendency to breed on the islands, in very localised areas and there is reason to believe that disturbances in the countryside are the cause of poor reproductive success. There is also anecdotal evidence that breeding activity and success, even of local species was higher in the years when the season was closed.

While we can appreciate that there is no true alternative to hunting in the spring and that shooting clay plates is not the same in the slightest. It is also a fact, that hunting a much larger number of species is permissible during 5 months of the year. Frankly 21 days is almost nothing in comparison and fighting so hard to retain them shows an element of pure selfishness and strife for instant gratification. This is evident since, hunters should be able to understand that should populations continue to decline, not even their own children will be able to grow up with a love of hunting, be it in the spring or in autumn. Putting in a small sacrifice now helps prevent the day when no one will be able to hunt at all, simply because there are no more birds left to shoot.

For these reasons S-Cubed takes a stand against spring hunting.

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