



Marsa Alam. The destruction of 7,000 m² of coral reefs, by the owner of a hotel in this part of the Red Sea coast, has outraged foreign tourists. They have launched an international appeal to boycott the establishment.

Unpunished vandalism

Are foreign tourists more concerned about Egypt's underwater riches than the Egyptians themselves? This question springs to mind after one reads of the call for a boycott on a website set up by Red Sea diving enthusiasts. Here is what it says: "Are you a diver who respects the environment? If you are, this concerns you: 7,000 m² of coral on the Marsa Alam barrier reef have just been destroyed by bulldozers on the instructions of the owner of the Kahramana Hotel, disobeying the government and environmental authorities! This is an incalculable loss when one considers the unique characteristics of the Red Sea's ecosystem, which is extremely fragile and needs this reef in order to survive. ... Here is a list of e-mail addresses to which you can send a letter of complaint. When choosing a holiday destination on the Red Sea coast, please avoid this hotel. The hotel owner must be shown that he is an idiot who has no idea of the consequences of his actions! We are counting on you!" Following this call for a boycott, the website gives the e-mail addresses of two officials in the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency's (EEAA) Department of Nature Protection: Dr Moustafa Fouda and Dr Mahmoud Hanafi. After being notified of what had happened, both officials visited the site and sent their report to the relevant governor and the Egyptian Minister of the Environment.

What happened in Marsa Alam is a disaster in the true sense of the word and, apparently, one that will not be punished. In this town, 350 km south of Hurgada, on the shores of the Red Sea, the presence of a large number of coral reefs means that the water off the beaches of some of the hotels is only 50-60 cm deep. "At the Kahramana Hotel, there are two beaches and, because of the coral, you can only paddle in the water. In order to swim, you have to take the hotel's free shuttle service and go to another beach 10 minutes away. Whilst it is true that this is not very practical, it doesn't mean that we think the coral should be destroyed", confessed Annie, a French tourist.

Ahmed Balbaa, investor and owner of the Kahramana Hotel, destroyed 7,000 m² of coral on 3rd August in order to please his clientele. This act was in breach of the environmental laws and revealed his total ignorance of the incalculable value these ecosystems represent as part of our natural heritage. Tourists in the area find it all hard to believe. "Investors like him haven't got a clue about sustainable tourism", said Alberto, an Italian tourist. "When the coral disappears, there will be no fish and, as a result, no divers; in other words no more ecotourism", commented another. "What the owner did was really stupid", concluded a third tourist.

Permit refused

A lack of planning on this coastline means that some hotels have beaches that are perfect for bathing and others do not. Thus, 6 months ago, several hotel owners carried out environmental impact studies for projects aimed at removing the coral off their beaches to facilitate swimming. However, permission was refused by experts from the Ministry of the Environment. In spite of this, Ahmed Balbaa, the most stubborn investor, owner of the Kahramana Hotel, took advantage of the Minister of Tourism's visit to Marsa Alam to tell him that the coral reef off his hotel's beach was dead and he asked for a permit to remove it. This was before NGO representatives of South Sinai informed this minister that the coral here was very much alive. Suddenly, the permit was refused. Then, the Sharm El-Sheikh terrorist attacks took place on 23rd July 2005 and threw everything into chaos. Taking advantage of this situation, Balbaa quickly removed 7,000 m² of coral! "The real problem lies in the fact that other investors with the same problem might copy Balbaa, and this could lead to the disappearance of all the coral in this region", explained a representative of the EEAA who wished to remain anonymous. Initially fined 25,000 dollars, a sum that was later reduced to 5,000, Balbaa has paid nothing to date.

This disaster has stirred up a heated debate in the specialised foreign press. Meanwhile, the Egyptian Ministers of Tourism and the Environment have made no comment. Neither the police nor the rangers in charge of guarding the protected natural sites have visited the destroyed reef yet. There is a sharp contrast between the apparent paralysis of the Egyptian authorities and the action taken by foreign tourists, which has led to large numbers of people cancelling their reservations at the hotel in question. However, the danger is that the person responsible for this damage may have created a precedent, which might be copied by other unscrupulous hotel owners.

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