

blocked. Twentieth Century Fox's offices in England, yet despite numerous attempts no one was available to comment.

There had been a lot of hype that the 16 July release date would have made Malta and the UK the first two European countries to release the film.

Now Malta will have to contend with being the second European country after the UK.

Eden Century Cinemas had planned a special showing of the first episode in the THX Cinema 16 at one second past midnight on Thursday, 15 July. As Malta was one hour ahead of the UK, it would also have screened the film an hour before its release in the UK. Thus Malta would have been the first European country to screen *Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*.

Contacted yesterday, a spokesperson for Eden Leisure Group said their plans had been disrupted and they got to know of the decision on Wednesday.

"Obviously, our plans have been derailed and we have no control over what Fox decides to do," he said. Neither did he have any idea why the film's release was postponed. Malta's was not the only victim of a sudden decision taken by Twentieth Century Fox. The company also blocked plans by leading UK cinema chains for non-stop, 24-hour screenings of the new *Star Wars* movie.

Warner Village, Virgin Cinemas and Odcon had hoped to start showing the George Lucas movie at one minute past midnight on July 15 and then continue to screen it around the clock. The chains had secured special licences from local authorities to keep theatres open 24 hours a day. The decision was taken, after consultation with Lucasfilm, because of fears that early morning screening would not sell out. First screening of the film in the UK will be at 9am, Virgin and Warner announced.

Maltese seabed 'rich in history'

Karl Schembri

THE FOREIGN television production company, Eco-Nova, yesterday presented its documentary about wrecks lying in the seabed in Maltese waters to Tourism Minister Michael Refalo.

The documentary forms part of the *Oceans of Mystery* series broadcast on the Discovery Channel. This was the second time Eco-Nova came to shoot footage of the Maltese seabed, and the company president, Rick Haupt, announced they will return next year to film two more episodes.

"We do not usually visit a place more than once, but Malta is an exception. It is so rich in history that we decided to come back next year," Mr Haupt said.

The Eco-Nova nine-man crew filmed the World War I minesweeper *Eddy* and HMS *Southwold* which are lying in deep waters, at around 200 feet. Next year, they are expecting to film much older ships, possibly Roman wrecks. Mr Haupt has made it a policy that during the dives he works very closely with local archaeologists.

"It is a hands-off policy that we respect through our shows," he said. He added that they found a treasure of artefacts on the Maltese wrecks which could be stolen if the site was disclosed.

Mr Haupt explained that Eco-Nova takes a human interest angle



Rick Haupt

in its work on the ships in question, by illustrating the story behind the shipwreck, the people involved, their names and their connections. He described how, as a producer, he also tries to generate awareness among the local population on the unique interest such wrecks have and the importance of ensuring they are not pilfered. Some, he said, are even considered war graves.

Dr Refalo said the documentaries are also of enormous interest to Malta and to the tourism industry. Not only does Malta get a mention wherever the episode is screened, but Mr Haupt made it a point to include scenic and cultural footage which portrays Malta as a desirable, different and interesting holiday destination, he said.

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"When a chance, as has happened on this occasion with Eco-Nova, turns up, one has to capitalise on the possibility and potential. Rather than make non-existent funding available, one delves into a store of experience, goodwill and energy, which the Ministry and the National Tourism Organisation of Malta have in abundance, and puts all these assets to good use," the minister said.

He added that due to funding limitations, NTOM had to retrench its otherwise very necessary promotional and even basic advertising campaigns, obtaining the exposure which Eco-Nova's initiative provides.

He thanked the Air Malta chairman Louis Grech, and Commander of the Armed Forces of Malta Brigadier Rupert Montanaro for their immediate and positive response to assist and join tourism aboard Eco-Nova's initiative.

He also thanked Charles Micallef St John, a senior member of the ministry's secretariat, for the liaison and support which he provided to Eco-Nova in their dealings with government departments and entities whose permission for the project was required.

Oceans of History, a 47-minute documentary is relayed in 109 countries and translated in several languages.



Malta wrecks in Oceans of History documentary

Rick Haupt, president of Eco-Nova Multi-Media Productions Ltd, has been in Malta for the past two weeks with nine professional divers and cameramen, filming an episode for his Oceans of History series for the Discovery Channel.

The crew had already been in Malta before to shoot *The Second Siege of Malta* for the same series.

"It is not our policy to go to the same destination twice but for Malta I had to make an exception. The island is so rich in history and there is so much to do here," Mr Haupt told a news conference at the tourism ministry yesterday.

He also plans to return for more filming.

The series has been a huge success in the 109 countries where the programme is broadcast.

During the current visit the team has filmed the wrecks of the

warships HMS *Southwold* and HMS *Eddie*. Their location, said to be in deep water, was not revealed.

Other wrecks have been located from the First and Second World Wars.

Tourism Minister Michael Refalo said the episodes were of enormous interest to historians and archaeologists and important for Malta's tourism industry.

"Due to funding limitations, the National Tourism Organisation has had to retrench its otherwise very necessary promotional and even basic advertising campaigns and, therefore, the exposure which Eco-Nova's initiative provides is certainly very valuable," Dr Refalo said.

Dr Refalo said Malta had not been performing well enough in certain markets. The main reason for this, he said, was that the NTOM had not been adequately

funded for the past five years and was unable to undertake necessary advertising and promotional campaigns.

The crew's visit here and the filming were made possible with the cooperation of Air Malta and the Armed Forces of Malta among others.

Mr Haupt said the previous documentary about Malta had been well received after it was screened on Discovery Channel and History Channel.

Eco-Nova, he said, had made it a policy that during the dives, work would be carried out in cooperation with local archaeologists.

"We try to arouse awareness among the local population about the uniqueness of wrecks and about how important it is that they are not pilfered, especially since some of them are considered to be war graves," Mr Haupt said.