

Editorial:

The Future Face of Gozo

The everlasting battle continues between development, usually spearheaded by business interests, and conservation, the domain of those who believe that enough is enough and that continued development spells disaster for the future of Gozo.

On the one hand we have over the past few months seen applications to MEPA for a review of the Gozo and Comino development plan. This is obviously an over-due plan to upgrade facilities in Gozo, including improvement of facilities at schools, the extension of the Gozo General Hospital area and the enhancement of 'open vibrant public spaces'.

On the other hand we see the weak side of MEPA which seems at times to be powerless to reverse abuses and enforce a strict plan of development. The case in point is that at Dwejra. It was to be hoped that following the launching of the much-vaunted project to set up 'the first coastal nature reserve in Malta' at Dwejra in 2004 at a cost of €324,708, we would see that proper protection would be afforded to this place with its unique ecological, geomorphologic, palaeontological and archeological features.

Dwejra has over several generations been such a neglected site that anyone felt they had the power to do whatever they liked on their tiny plot of land which they owned and treasured. Buildings have gone up and changed from boathouses to summer residences. The pebbly beach has been transformed into a slippery concrete platform, with several mini-jetties erected for the occasional launch of boats. The authorities of the time did not just turn a blind eye: they simply excised this bit of geography out of their consciousness.

Then MEPA came into the picture with great plans to restore the status quo. Years have passed and the result is...what? Our understanding is that some owners have been asked to pay a fine. Others have been asked to remove the top floor. But nothing has been done to repair the major damage done over the years.

Related also is the largely unregulated traffic that now has engulfed and continues to endanger this tiny oasis called the Inland Sea. The quality of the water has deteriorated to a degree where swimming has become a health hazard from contamination from the never-ending stream of boats that take tourists out to the open sea. Even such a simple measure as replacing oil by electrical or even manual power has proved too difficult a measure to adopt.

But the most glaring example of disgraceful inactivity has been the saga relating to the 'information centre' cum restaurant projected for the site. A two-story concrete skeleton has defaced the Dwejra area for the last couple of years, with what appears to be a deadlock between the responsible authorities and the builders. If we need an information centre in the area, do we need it to be of such gargantuan proportions? If we need a restaurant of such a size, does it have to be in the most prominent position overlooking the Inland Sea? Are the authorities completely powerless to overcome the vested interests?

If this is a mirror of things to come, then Gozo is in for a very rough time. Conservation has become debased currency and replaced by a dangerous drive to maximise profits at the cost of our inheritance.

Maurice Cauchi

