

Environment



Pristine garigue, which supports a large biodiversity of plant and animal species, is being smothered under grit and topsoil to make way for Eucalyptus trees and other non-indigenous species for trapping and hunting purposes. Seen here is a site in Bingemma, l/o Rabat.

Wied Ghomor and Mqabba: two weights, two measures



Alan Deidun

Environmentalists' spirits were lifted when they heard the Prime Minister declaring on May 1 that his government would strive to prove its environmental credentials. They assumed this bold statement would provide breathing space for Malta's beleaguered Outside Development Zone areas, ideally through a blanket prohibition on further development in such areas.

Their elation was short-lived. No sooner had the ink dried on the newspaper articles reporting Joseph Muscat's words than the Planning Commission undermined the his pledge through various ODZ approvals, thus snuffing out any hope that things would really change.

Only last week, the Commission, whose eight members include six architects, gave the green light for a 29-square-metre room to replace a smaller crumbling structure in an ODZ area in Mgarr. The Commission also approved three other ODZ developments in Mqabba, Rabat and Mellieħa, despite the case officers in all three cases giving them the thumbs down.

Intriguingly, the ODZ development waved through at Mqabba consisted of four garages in a quarry, which the case officer said broke the policy promoting the rehabilitation of quarries.

More recently, the Commission sanctioned a 33-square-metre store in an ODZ area overlooking St Thomas Bay despite the fact that in addition to the usual objectors (the

case officer and Environmental Protection Directorate) which this time round the Agricultural Advisory Committee also deemed the development as 'excessive' considering the relatively small landholding of the applicant. One can only imagine the sense of frustration that case officers and officials working in the EPD and Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) feel when they see that, in most cases, their recommendations against development are simply given the cold shoulder.

One may argue that the Planning Board's unanimous decision to reject the application to build an elderly home in a quarry at Wied Ghomor broke the mould. Although this was indeed a watershed moment for the local environmental movement, my elation steps there and cynicism inevitably seeps in. Let me qualify my position.

The troops opposing the Wied Ghomor proposal, marshalled by Swieqi local council and Nature Trust (Malta), had mobilised residents, the media and even the Opposition, such that the Planning Board members were under a lot of pressure to oppose the proposal. Conversely, the proposal to build garages in the Mqabba quarry did not attract the attention of residents, media or political parties and thus was approved without a hitch, despite several objecting expert opinions advising the Planning Authority on the case.

NGOs can only do so much and so they tend to channel their efforts on the most blatant cases of Planning Board permit applications. The remaining deluge of smaller-scale – but much more numerous – development proposals and sanctioning of illegal development in ODZ areas, which do not need Planning Board approval, sneak through unhindered. In most cases the only scrutiny they receive is at institutional level, namely by various directorates and advisory committees.

As a result, the ODZ fabric is unravelling faster under the pressure of many small blows than due to the fewer large blows, and given that this ODZ rampage is piecemeal, the public hardly notices it, as the pace of change is slow but unrelenting.

It's just garigue after all

The latest fad to hit our islands is to buy a plot of garigue land (*xaghri*) and cover it with tons of aggregate and grit and a layer of topsoil to

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The Maltese spider orchid is endemic to Malta and a legally-protected species, specimens of which had been found living in a garigue site at Bingemma that was covered with soil.

reclaim it either for agricultural purposes, bird hunting or trapping.

The Maltese grasp of what constitutes a healthy environment and of the role and extent of our national biodiversity is so poor that this land reclamation practice hardly raises an eyebrow. In fact, as long as the owners these plots of land do not build on it but limit themselves to their reclamation most people would probably view their efforts favourably, especially if they plant leafy trees or lawns for landscaping purposes, thus effectively creating some greenery in an otherwise arid landscape. Even the top echelons of the Malta Developers Association (MDA) share this view.

Anyone agreeing with such actions would do well to get a basic understanding of ecology. For instance, undisturbed garigue is a habitat that harbours the highest number of rare, endemic (restricted only to our islands) and indigenous (native to the Mediterranean biome) plant and animal species (such as the Maltese shrew). Inaccessibility is the only way to defend pristine plots of garigue land, as I doubt how effective any enforcement action would be in such cases.

An expanse of previously pristine garigue in Bingemma, close to Nadur Tower in an area known as Xaghra tal-Ghattuqa, recently bore the brunt of this misguided land reclamation practice. In view of its arid nature the site might seem uninspiring at this time of the year, yet in this very location, at least four orchid species have been recorded by naturalists, all of which should enjoy the benefits of their protected

legal status. Among these orchid species is the Maltese spider orchid (*Brimba seuda* – *Ophrys melitensis*), which is endemic (and thus restricted) to the Maltese islands.

It seems OK to have conflicts of interest

Maltatoday reported last week that, since January, five planning applications proposing some form of development in ODZ areas and which were considered by the Planning Commission were presented by architect Robert Musumeci, who advises government on planning issues. Of these, two were approved, one was turned down and two are pending. Three applications were presented by architect Edwin Min-toff and two by MP, architect and BICC chairman Charles Buhagiar.

While it is true that these three architects are simply carrying out their professional practice in presenting such applications, one must also consider the potential conflict of interest they might have.

For instance, advising government on planning issues and then representing clients on applications for ODZ development which might just qualify for a permit thanks to new policies you helped introduce is akin, at least in my view, to running with the hare and to hunting with the hounds. But we seem to have no qualms about such conflicts of interest in a country where many are those who wear many hats at the same time.

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