

OPINION&LETTERS

A legacy for our ocean



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Now that the dust has settled on the landmark 'Our Ocean' conference hosted by our islands, it is time to take stock of the legacy that such a massive undertaking has hopefully sown.

For instance, this conference, the fourth in its series, has chalked up a staggering €7.2 billion in financial pledges from different actors (of which nearly €560 million originating from the EU), tallied an additional 2.5 million square kilometres of marine space within designated Marine Protected Areas and inspired a total of 437 tangible commitments in favour of better ocean conservation and management.

Of the latter, over 100 originate from the corporate sector, testimony to the large-scale mobilisation of the business sector which has warmed up finally to the need to address human impacts on our ocean.

Malta chipped in by highlighting its resolve to designate more MPAs within local waters, this time for more offshore areas covering cave and reef habitats as identified within the Life Bahar project.

This will bring up to over 30 per cent the total fraction of our Fisheries Marine Zone that is enclosed within local designated MPAs. (The FMZ extends to 25 nautical miles from the shore).

The towering challenge now is to proceed towards the formulation of management plans for these MPAs and the implementation (through effective stakeholder consensus and financing) of the management measures.

Malta also announced the introduction of a plastic bottle recovery scheme with the aim of stemming the flow of these bottles to the marine space, as well as initiatives towards the creation of ad hoc entities tasked with managing our underwater cultural heritage and with acting as centres of excellence for small states pursuant to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The need to address marine litter dominated the Our Ocean proceedings. A facet of this was contributed by the Lonely Whale association, which is campaigning to eliminate single-use plastic straws (i.e. campaigning for a 'strawless ocean').

This goal might sound trivial but is not without its merits – 500 million straws are used in the US alone on a daily basis. There are many alternatives to single-use straws (e.g. making use of glass, metal, paper or bamboo straws, or not using straws at all – these can be viewed at: <https://www.strawlessocean.org/aardvark-paper-straws>).

An appeal to Transport Malta

The recent announcement by Transport Malta that the road meandering between Selmun and Xemxija will be widened has understandably been met with resonating angst. Such an unceremonious reception can be pinned down to three main factors.

Namely, the foreboding that such a 'widening' will probably result in the loss of roadside vegetation – including mature trees – of ecological importance, given the hindsight gained from the plethora of other road-widening projects currently dotting the islands.



With the Our Ocean conference over, the challenge now is to ensure a tangible legacy the benefit of the younger generations.

Secondly, the same stretch of road is not your run-of-the-mill strip of tarmac within an urbanised area lined by the trademark towering Ficus trees or heavily manicured roadside shrubs, but rather skirts past Wied il-Mizieb and through a hill blanketed by a dense cover of Aleppo pine trees.

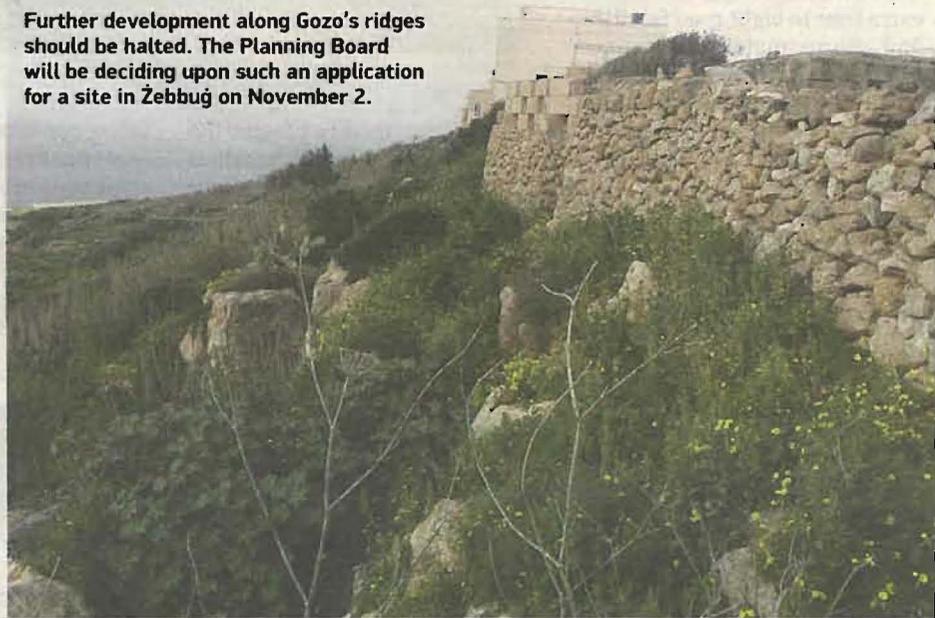
Thus, the damage to be wrought here will be comprehensive.

Thirdly, the proposed works, as rightly underscored by many readers, will simply delay tailbacks by a few hundred metres, to the next bottleneck, which happens to be Xemxija Hill, notorious for its gridlock prowess.

Here again, we have hindsight... once the oak trees at Lija were mowed down to ease the flow of traffic at this juncture, tailbacks were simply transferred further down the same stretch. Transport Malta should reverse its decision to widen the Selmun-Xemxija stretch simply because it will constitute an exercise in futility, with the 'collateral' damage of numerous mature Aleppo pine trees and maquis habitat species to boot. No amount of 'compensatory' tree planting or transplanting (Aleppo pine trees don't survive such a process, anyway) can dampen the expected impacts of such road-widening.

Audacity is called for in the search for less impactful alternatives, which might even

Further development along Gozo's ridges should be halted. The Planning Board will be deciding upon such an application for a site in Żebbuġ on November 2.



include measures to discourage vehicle use (I, myself, am an avid car user).

More ridge development for Gozo?

Large-scale development is precluded from ridge edges by virtue of numerous policies, for obvious reasons, not least the visual and landscape impact. There is also the ecological impact, given that the periphery of ridges is normally colonised by dense maquis vegetation and spawns many a freshwater spring which in turn feed our watercourses further downstream.

The supposed sanctity of such sites still does not make them immune to proposed development. PA 01398/17, in fact, has been submitted for the development of six apartments over three floors, along with provisions for parking over yet another floor.

The applicant will probably contend that the proposed development rubs shoulders

with existing buildings, despite it being within an ODZ area. Given the densely built-up area of these islands, however, where buildings are visible from every nook and cranny bar a few exceptions, this is a fallacious argument and could be used to simply further extend built-up perimeters.

The good news is that this planning application, originally slated to be heard by the three-membered Planning Commission, renowned for its favourable disposition towards ODZ applications (this is justified by ODZ permit approval statistics for the same commission) and perfunctory hearings, has now been 'undelegated'.

Simply put, this application will now be deliberated upon by the Planning Board, on November 2.

One augurs that reason will prevail and that the board will deem it fit to preserve yet another authentic slice of Gozo for posterity.

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