

OPINION & LETTERS

Eco-Comino rather than banker's paradise



Beyond the tourist brochures and bankers' ideas of paradise, there is a wild side to Comino. Inset: Haphazard anchoring on Comino's seagrass meadows is wreaking untold damage, besides the fly-tipping from boats of glass and plastic bottles. Urgent intervention is called for.



ALAN DEIDUN

Wayne Flask could not have nailed it better in his excellent reply ('A mastershaft for Comino', August 16) to Antoine Attard's blinkered contribution on a future vision for the small island ('A master plan for Comino', August 14).

The latter, although probably penned with the best of intentions, has exhumed the haunting spirits of heavy-handed interventions for Comino that are wheeled out from time to time. 'Sustainable development', a term coined in the 1970s by the then Swedish environment minister, has become a cliché hijacked by those advocating for further development so as to assume a veneer of legitimacy (read Attard's Freudian slip 'sustainable growth' – there is nothing sustainable about current tourist flows to Comino, for instance).

The most sobering aspect of Attard's contribution is that it betrays a chasm in philosophy between those who have never experienced at skin-level the wilderness and remoteness of Comino (in other words, have never camped on the island) and the 'uninitiated' – such as the day-trippers, who stick to the relative safety of Blue Lagoon

and Santa Marija, or the majority of hotel residents for whom the Comino experience is just a jaunt to the hotel pool or a jolty drive in Comino's hinterland.

The rift between the two mindsets is such that it can only be bridged through a 'direct induction' programme, namely taking time to stroll through Comino's unforgiving landscape, which has been devastated on other parts of the archipelago, taking time to breathe in the air suffused with the aromas of so many indigenous garigue plants, or lying motionless so as to spot a fleeting glimpse of one of the many reptilian inhabitants of the islands.

Our students should be inducted to the tenets of 'wilderness appreciation' from a young age so as to give them ownership of the vestiges of wilderness on the islands, making them advocates for their preservation. Such an appreciation goes

beyond an academic appreciation of the floral and faunal importance of a place. It must also latch on to the intangible assets of the same site, such as detachment from constructed areas, lack of light and noise pollution and the absence of modern-day accoutrements such as paved roads, catering establishments and such.

This recognition of the impalpable value of natural areas would transcend the academic background of the individual, such that even bankers like Attard would partake of it, despite the mantra of 'you can't manage something if you can't measure it' which prevails among those in the financial sector in general.

It might be completely alien to our utilitarian disposition but the lack of modern-day commodities and amenities, branded by some as a 'lack of progress', is actually cherished by those yearning to turn back the clock. For instance, in the Aeolian archipelago, off northern Sicily, the two minor islands of Alicudi and Filicudi are largely deprived of electricity and cars (transport on land is mainly mediated by donkeys). Nevertheless the islands still draw sizeable crowds who feast on their authentic simplicity, shorn of the feeling of sameness that is haunting most Mediterranean coastal areas.

Closer to home, cars are a complete anathema to the island of Marittimo in the Aegadian archipelago off Trapani in Sicily.

Yet another flaw of Attard's contribution is that it does not take stock of the current management status of Comino. As rightly pointed

out by veteran environmentalist Alfred Baldacchino, by virtue of its Natura 2000 status, Comino should be managed as per the provisions of a management plan, which has been completed (as for all the other terrestrial Natura 2000 sites) and whose implementation should be kickstarted in the near future. Such provisions factor in ongoing socio-economic activities on Comino while ensuring that the natural fabric of the island is not unravelled.

While we (agencies like the Environment and Resources Authority) have started addressing the terrestrial dimension of the human footprint on Comino, through an eradication programme for alien plant species, for example, or the removal of tons of debris, the marine dimension still beckons for some form of intervention. The seabed of Comino's most iconic bays is literally peppered with anchors and mooring blocks which are devastating the *Posidonia oceanica* seagrass meadows, paving the way for barren underwater landscapes and the infiltration of the alien seagrass *Halophila stipulacea*.

The scale of the devastation is difficult to fathom but is very real, with detached seagrass shoots and anchor chains zigzagging haphazardly across the seagrass meadows being the order of the day. This should concern us all because of the pivotal importance of the these meadows in acting as fish nurseries,

oxygenating the water column, trapping fine particles and thereby maintaining water transparency, and stabilising the seabed and thereby buffering it against erosion, among a welter of other ecological functions.

Anchoring should be a regulated affair rather than a free-for-all, haphazard one – the same call has been repeatedly made, to no avail so far, for the Mgarr ix-Xini Marine Protected Area.

Coupled with the anchoring bane, one finds the unadulterated fly-tipping from boats of glass and plastic bottles, strewing the seabed in the most popular bars of Comino. Here again, spot fines and revoking of boat licences should do the trick.

There is a wild side to Comino that beckons and which should be preserved for posterity. Comino's physical dimensions are such as to make it the perfect candidate for an eco-island as one can easily monitor flows of people and material in and out of the island.

Why not introduce the first plastic-free beach on the island, for instance? Let's experiment and dabble on Comino, but for once not in the form of a hotel, road network or concrete pavement extension, but with innovative environmental proposals so as to turn the clock back. After all, we owe it to our archipelago's last great wilderness!

“
There is a wild side to Comino that beckons and which should be preserved for posterity