

Environment

Despite unsustainable fishing practices, it's business as usual



Alan Deidun

A heart-wrenching interview with a local full-time fisherman was featured last Sunday in *Maltatoday*. It crystallised many of the grievances that local fishermen have with respect to the current situation concerning their livelihood.

In a nutshell, the fisherman in question, Martin Caruana, lamented the pillage of fish stocks, mainly by foreign trawlers, within the 25 nautical mile zone around the Maltese islands, and the general lack of law enforcement out at sea.

Both are sacrosanct truths that cannot be denied.

In addition to the pressures mentioned by Caruana, other factors are undermining the health of fishing stocks.

For instance, the deployment of trammel nets (*parit*) at the mouth of bays or just off the shoreline is a constant onslaught on juvenile fish, as acknowledged by anglers and conscientious fishermen alike.

The constant call for such trammel nets to be pushed further out to sea have been consistently met with a deafening silence under successive administrations. This is in spite of the fact that safeguarding coastal fish spawning and nursery areas is in the interest of those who earn their livelihood from the sea.

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Fishing legislation concerning trammel nets have not been revised since 1934.

The legislation attempts to buttress spawning fish within bays by prohibiting the casting of such nets in bays from mid-February to mid-July.

However, the law is being circumvented as it does not include any provisions regarding non-indented stretches of the coastline. The result is coastal areas cluttered with trammel nets deployed just a few tens of metres away from the shore.

Yet another issue overlooked in the interview is the fate meted out to fish species with a low commercial value.

Concerns are traditionally only expressed about fish species that can be sold.

Shark, especially the blue shark (*huta kahla*), and the different species of dogfish (*mazzola*) and ray species, make up a considerable amount of these non-commercial species, with most being caught as bycatch. So as to justify their capture, some fishermen attempt to pass off caught shark specimens for other more popular species, notably swordfish, with the occasional use of such species as bait.

As one of the accompanying photos aptly illustrates, sharks and rays are ending up being unceremoniously discarded back into the sea as hawkers give up on placing them on the market in view of their unpopularity with customers. The sharks and rays are dumped in full view of the public, in popular bays such as Spinola Bay or Marsaxlokk. Using shark flesh as bait defies all conservation logic and is a practice defunct in the West, such as using whale fat to make candles or soap.

Enforcing minimum landing sizes appears to be an impossible task for local authorities. The dusky grouper (*černa*) perhaps epitomises this phenomenon.

For instance, the dusky grouper action plan, launched a full five years ago in 2011, held a lot of promise, even including provisions for the enforcement of the minimum landing size of 45cm for this species. Despite this, anyone walking along the promenade of Malta's chief fishing port of Marsaxlokk, can regularly see undersized dusky groupers boldly on display in a number of top restaurants.

Such despicable acts are, however, met with impunity as we consistently fail to make the quantum leap from propositions and wish lists printed on paper to implementation in the field.

More petrol stations for the new year

The deluge of petrol station applications in Outside Development Zone areas approved over the past few years shows no signs of abating during 2016, with the Malta Environment and Planning Authority set to deliberate planning application 03387/14,



When will the call to push trammel nets away from bays and the coast be heeded finally?



Discarded and dismembered specimens of shark being used as bait. Using such slow-reproducing species as bait defies all logic.

which proposes demolishing existing buildings and relocating an existing petrol station in Mosta to a location in Magħtab.

At face value, the proposal is desirable, as it entails relocating an activity that is incompatible with residential areas to an alternative location. However, delving deeper into the application reveals that it also proposes to develop a car wash, retail outlets and underground garages, spread over a gargantuan footprint of 3,500 metres.

The site hosts woodworking facilities close by, and still bears the hallmarks of past agricultural activity, including two abandoned farmhouses, a disused field and carob trees.

Interestingly, while Mepa asked the applicant to mitigate the major visual impact that the proposed

petrol station complex will have on its predominantly rural surroundings, the Environmental Planning Statement authors claimed no such mitigation was possible – a tacit acknowledgment of the environmental impacts the development will have.

Magħtab residents have submitted a comprehensive letter of objection to the proposal pointing out that the application runs counter to a gamut of Structure Plan and local plan policies.

Besides environmental and visual concerns, the objectors say the proposed development may create a traffic hazard in the narrow road which is notorious for the number of accidents it has witnessed over the years. Not surprisingly, 116 Magħtab residents signed a petition opposing the application's approval.

Mepa's Environment Protection Directorate (EPD) has also declared its objection to the proposed development for two reasons: The site is not a designated area considered potentially suitable for accommodating a fuel service station in the Draft Fuel Service Stations Policy of 2014.

The EPD also considers the proposal unacceptable from an environmental point of view, given that it is located in a predominantly open and undeveloped rural area and involves excessive land take-up to accommodate the development.

Will Mepa heed these legitimate concerns or will we be lumped with yet another excuse for a fully-fledged commercial development in the middle of fields?

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