

At long last!



Dumping of construction and quarrying debris just outside the precincts of the quarry lying directly above the Inland Sea in Dwejra, Gozo. Such dumping does not bode well for the Heritage Park being developed on site. Are authorities simply waiting for some major cataclysm to happen to the Inland Sea prior to taking any action? (Photos courtesy of www.gozitans.eu)

The authorities have finally decided to bite the bullet and take decisive action against the squatters and usurpers of public land at Gnejna and St Thomas Bay. Such an action is long overdue since it counters a brazen defiance of the law and the basic tenets of morality and ethics.

One hopes that this is just the prelude to a systematic crackdown on the multitude of boathouses dotting our coastline - the 'boathouses' at L-Ahrax (along four different bays), at Bahar ic-Caghaq/Pembroke, the remaining ones at Delimara, and Dwejra and Dahlet Qorrot in Gozo should follow suit. The fact that only post-1967 constructions will fall within the remit of such action raises some eyebrows, presumably because of prescription - but does an older age make an illegal construction less illegal?

One must condemn the way L-Orizzont reported the matter (March 24), stating that boathouse owners were disappointed about MEPA's stance since some of the structures were naturally hewn out of rock and they simply added a door, and that some boathouses in Dwejra even had two floors.

What selfish reasoning! Rather than lauding MEPA for finally taking such action regarding this highly contentious issue, the newspaper chose to justify squatters and robbers of public land, who have been effectively availing themselves of a vantage seaside dwelling for years at the cost of public enjoyment of the area, by building an eyesore.

Still even more for money

Following my previous column's focus on money-spinning estate agencies comes this fortnight's sequel, spurred on by news of the first property auction organised (yesterday) by Malta Property Auctioneers, with 20 properties worth more than Lm3.6 million going under the hammer, as reported in the Classified Section of The Sunday Times of March 11.

While I have no qualms about a normal property auction, I certainly drawn the line at the blatant way some of the properties are advertised. Quoting from the same newspaper article, "he (Mr Faure, managing director of Malta Property Auctioneers) pointed to a large farmhouse with some 7.5 tumoli of land in Marsascula... it has beautiful country views... and can be developed into four villas or farmhouses, each with own pool and surrounding gardens."

The article does not specify whether the footprint of existing buildings will be increased or not, whether the area is ODZ (Outside Development Zone) or not, or whether permits are in hand for the prospected change of use.

Against such a backdrop, such advertising is conveying the message that the monetary tag placed upon this property (Lm400,000-Lm 425,000) can give purchasers access to all of the above. In addition, such flawed advertising is adding further grist to the urbanisation mill by proposing the further encroachment upon virgin land.

Some property magazines distributed with the Sunday newspapers also carry anomalous statements, such as "...plot within green area, which does not yet have permit for development" - the 'yet' jars with one's definition of an unbiased advertisement.

Gozo airstrip - the veil is down

As regards the Gozo airstrip extension in Xewkija, the time of ploys and feigning is finally up - in fact, two contributions to The Sunday Times finally focus on the real justifications of those

proposing such an extension.

Franco J. Scicluna, one of the most zealous proponents of such an extension, states (March 18) that "yacht owners have their own mini-marina at Mgarr; why should not owners of light planes have their own little base here?" This statement in itself speaks volumes about the motivations behind the vehement pro-extension campaign.

Proponents might put in a cursory reference to the need to strengthen the Malta-Gozo link and might even dupe the whole country that they have a genuine interest in reviving Gozo's economy - deep down, however, what really comes out is the desire to have a base where flight enthusiasts can practise their pastime, as this column has already suggested in the past.

The Classified section in The Sunday Times also carried quite an eye-opening insert with proposals for the airstrip extension at Xewkija, as drafted by Roy Perry. Among the various benefits to trickle from such an extension, Mr Perry lists "improve flying training in the Maltese Islands". So now we have passed from a modest "improving accessibility to Gozo" to something more ambitious - plans to develop a flight academy in Gozo.

While everyone is entitled to enjoy different pastimes, some pastimes should be definitely be considered at odds with our limited land resources. An analogy is the pressure piled up in the past by Formula 1 car racing enthusiasts for a racetrack at Hal Far.

Despite the local paucity in land resources, as a nation we certainly don't lack invective when it comes to land-hungry 'activities' - we should aim to bridle our imagination and put our feet back on the ground. Authorities should distinguish between the real needs of the country and simple pastime desires.

MEPA feedback on cases

Is-Sur ta' l-Ahrax boathouse - The room pictured in this same article was subject to ECF 82/07 when the Commissioner of Lands Dept (owner) and the occupier of the land were served with a stop and enforcement notice on February 16. The room was not yet constructed at that stage. He was also verbally warned to stop all works by the enforcement officer.

However, it now transpires that the occupier disobeyed the warnings and continued further illegal works in breach of the stop notice served against him. The ECF is now being referred for direct action. The offender was personally called by MEPA soon after and informed directly of the consequences.

The Direct Action team have been advised that the offender defied the stop notice.

It would certainly be an erudite experience to publish the names of such offenders who choose to squat over prime public land, and even raze the rocky coast on site to the ground to eke out a porch or convenient approach to the their 'boathouse' which can boast several unrelated amenities. One hopes that such a boathouse is soon reduced to rubble at the offender's cost and the site is rehabilitated. Only time will tell if the Direct Action team lived up to their billing.

Gharb fireworks factory - at this stage PA06387/05 is being adhered to. Owners were found on site and together with MEPA it was discussed what else need to be done regarding the other conditions that they still need to comply with within the stipulated time of the permit validation. Regarding the landscaping system, the owner has the facility to comply within five years since permission was granted. ECF 194/07 (Dumping close to fireworks factory) will be issued.

Hunting hide and wall along Gharb coast - Site is covered by ECF423/06 for room without permit, the hunting hide along with the walls are a breach of the same notice. PA4249/06 was submitted to sanction the mentioned room in ECF.

Tight-lipped EU Commission

The European Environment Bureau (EEB) is a compendium of over 140 environmentally-related entities, including NGOs, government entities, etc. In its November 2006 newsletter, the EEB criticises the EU Commission for its silence on a case where environmental policies were not completely abided by.

In fact, the newsletter's editorial title was: "Access to documents? Perhaps, but only once the show's over!" The editorial revolved around the development of a new harbour at Granadilla on Tenerife, in Spain's Canary Islands. On November 3, 2006, the Commission gave a carte blanche to local authorities for such a development, even though the project affects a natural area protected under the Habitats Directive.

The EU Commission stated that it had based its position on reports from the Directorates-General for Transport and Energy and Regional Policy, from the European Investment Bank and on reports provided by the Spanish authorities.

Upon reasonable suspicion that such reports were incomplete, the EEB asked the EU Commission for them, citing 2001 Regulation on Access to Documents, by virtue of which such documents must be made available within 15 working days, which can be extended to 30 days under extraordinary circumstances. An aggrieved party can also ask the Commission's secretary-general to overrule the Commission's ruling, to again make the documents available within 30 days.

Despite all this ironclad legislation, the EEB never received such documents, although three and a half months have passed between submission of its request and the Commission's

decision on the project.

For this reason, the EEB will be formally writing to the Ombudsman to formally censure the Commission's behaviour. The following passage from the same newsletter editorial is quite eloquent: "Although the Commission goes to great pains to say that it is bringing the EU closer to citizens, it is actively frustrating people who are trying to get involved and to exercise their rights. In a democracy, citizens who are concerned about pending decisions should have the ability to assess whether the Commission has correct and complete information. Withholding information relevant documents is a serious failure..."

Such strident statements certainly strike a chord with local, disillusioned environmentalists who feel frustrated in their attempts to unearth the complete truth.

Solution for lack of public consultation

The lack of public consultation and of the public's access to environmental information (largely due to the labyrinth constituted by the MEPA Website) are often considered as complaints by civil society.

The Sierra Club (the largest US-based NGO) has come with a possible solution. Their Website features an innovative tool known as the 'Legislative Tracker' which basically allows users to track the progress of Congress Bills related to the environment. Once a Bill's code is typed in, a synopsis of it is provided, together with the NGO's stance on the Bill, as well as opportunities through which visitors can interact and lobby the approval or rejection of the Bill. Visit www.sierraclub.org/legislativetracker/ for more insight.

Will a local NGO take up the cue from the Sierra Club?

Silver linings

KPMG tree-planting - Scores of trees were planted at the Salina National Park, near Kennedy Grove, by audit, tax and advisory firm KPMG as part of the 34U campaign. The audit firm has planted 265 trees as part of its corporate social responsibility programme to make Malta greener. Environment Minister George Pullicino attended the tree planting ceremony.

The trees were planted by employees and volunteers, who earlier on rolled up their sleeves and did some heavy gardening work at the Foresta 2000 site near Mellieha, which has been earmarked for upgrading and afforestation.

Young Enterprise projects - Increasing environment awareness for a greener future is the aim of the six members of Greenaction, a Young Enterprise group who have created solid-fuel briquettes, cubical blocks processed from newspapers which can be used for barbecues and fireplaces. The blocks are an inexpensive and environment-friendly alternative to buying expensive charcoal for barbecues or logs for a fire. The solid-fuel briquettes are easy to light, non-toxic, burn steadily for up to two hours and leave minimum ash.

alpra1@mail.global.net.mt; alan.deidun@um.edu.mt; deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk