

Church's Green Commission vs public ignorance



When do developers ever abide by permit conditions? The developer of a go-karting track at Bahar ic-Caghaq excavated ground outside his precincts, evoking the issue of an enforcement notice. The same site, which should be landscaped using indigenous plants and which bears the brunt of a juxtaposition of different recreational activities, is also the subject of yet another application for a different amenity.

The Church's Kummissjoni għall-Ambjent, formed under the auspices of the Pastoral Secretariat of the Archdiocese of Malta, broke new ground last month by coming to grips with one of its main objectives - i.e. the submission of technical opinion on major environmental issues.

It presented a fully-fledged opinion paper on the interim landfills environment impact survey (EIS) compiled by SLR Consulting Ltd and AIS Environmental Ltd on behalf of WasteServ Malta. Its most salient points are that the EIS reviewed shows a number of lacunae:

- ✦ it fails to elucidate on the purported impact on the fauna and marine ecology of the interim landfills environs

- ✦ it fails to shed enough light on the purported impact on the World Heritage Site close by

At the same time, the opinion paper urges authorities to adhere strictly to the precautionary principle when taking decisions and that the need to reclaim and rehabilitate used quarry sites should not affect the need to close Maghtab.

The commission continued to stretch every sinew in public education campaigns when it also compiled the third environmental prayer, to be read out this month during Sunday Mass - this time, biodiversity hogged the limelight, a theme which still needs to develop in the Maltese reality, as evidenced from some of the despicable contributions made to local newspapers.

The same prayer highlights how every hour, three species are extirpated from the face of the earth and also dwells on the ecological importance of stranded sea wrack on beaches due to the vast array of organisms that this harbours and the aggregation of sand particles (thus allaying beach erosion) that this leads to.

The simple mention of stranded sea wrack in a prayer should be welcomed by every environmentalist on these islands since, while the preservation of stranded sea wrack on beaches outside the holiday season is de rigueur in countries like South Africa, Australia and the US, the notion is only now being taken on board in our islands.

The same prayer should send shivers down the spines of every ruthless developer, architect, policy-maker and decision-taker in our islands through its wise invocation: "Ahfrilna jekk ahna l-bnedmin, mghomija mill-kilba għall-progress mhux ikkontrollat, qridna dak li hu tajjeb" ("forgive us if we humans, blinded by the urge for uncontrolled progress, destroyed what is good") - one only imagines the faces of property tycoons when they get to recite such a prayer during Sunday Mass or of the pro-golf lobby who dismiss the loss of local flora (such as orchids in the Pembroke garigue) with some derogatory jibe in local newspapers in favour of the proposed golf courses!

The commission is also planning to organise its next Environmental Seminar on May 22.

Golfers' thirst for land and World No Golf Day

The statements made by Hans Cauchi, general manager of the Westin Dragonara, reported by George Cini in The Times of March 29, beg to be ridiculed. He drools about Portugal deciding to build 40 golf courses in an area one and half times the size of Malta. For the umpteenth time, I reiterate to the pro-golfers: compare like with like!

Portugal's surface area is 91,951 sq km, or roughly 294 times that of Malta - hence, it's not so difficult to realise that the Portuguese can pretty well afford to do so while we cannot!

The wisdom regaled to us by Mr Cauchi in a way contradicts the very purpose for which it was aired - with 40+ golf courses, with a shorter distance to the UK and with cheaper airfares, it requires a very fertile imagination to think that hordes of UK golfers will be coming over to Malta!

Mr Cauchi states that we need at least five or six other golf courses - but seriously, multiply the 77 hectares earmarked for the Verdala golf course proposal by six, add to it the swathes of land illegally cordoned off to the public, the land used for dumping, and you are left with meagre parcels for public enjoyment. And I was forgetting a trivial detail - water! Where does Mr Cauchi think we should get the staggering amounts of water needed to keep six golf courses running on a semi-arid island like ours?

The amount needed for a golf course in Cyprus is estimated at 1.4 million m³ a year, which is way above the 79,000 m³ cited in the Verdala golf course EIA. Being close to the arid summer period, our friends from Cyprus muse correctly that it's too hot to play golf after 8-9 a.m. and it is difficult to envisage tourists on holiday waking up at 5 a.m. In a nutshell, all that water going down the drain during the hot summer months.

Friday, April 29, is World No Golf Day - coincidentally on the eve of Malta's EU accession, after which mega projects like the Verdala golf course should pass through a more thorough grilling.

Bahar ic-Caghaq and the clout of enforcement

I will take the cue from MEPA's Director of Planning, Stephen Farrugia's, laments about the exorbitant enforcement costs for MEPA carried in The Times of March 30 in a report by Michael Testa on the revision of MEPA policies.

One of the ways that MEPA could extricate itself from dragging enforcement cases which bog down its operations is to lobby for a change in the law whereby developers will be made to pay through their noses for developing ODZs, for having the cheek to apply for sanctionings and also to beef up such fines (especially in view of the opulent resources at the disposal of some developers). It is estimated that MEPA has some 6,000 pending enforcement notices.

The Bahar ic-Caghaq excavation works are a case in point. Site inspection officers found excavations outside the permitted limits of PA 2205/98 (referring to the construction of a go-karting track). The developer was contacted on site and was asked to suspend works immediately. ECF 258/04 is to be issued.

The same site is also under scrutiny due to another application - this time for the construction of a newly-featured dolphin pool, including the establishment of an artificial beach!

The list of projects in the pipeline for our bedraggled coastline is astounding! All this comes hot on the heels of the removal by the Lands Department of illegal permanent caravan sites - can we simply appreciate natural resources and amenities, such as vistas and landscapes, without having to place some esoteric development right in its midst?

Chimneys and cleaner air

Worrying developments concern the proposal to ease the regulations for chimneys with the distance against the requested height not being any more 25-metre radius but limited only to 25 metres from the immediate building.

Such a proposal certainly undermines all the positive steps being taken to ensure a cleaner atmosphere! The proposal that the chimney should be at least 4.25 m from the façade (for aesthetic purposes) pales in the face of such a health hazardous proposal!

More roads on the way!

A Green Point slot by MEPA last year carried the following information: There are 2,100 km of roads in these islands - enough to stretch to Amsterdam! In spite of this, part of the EU's structural funds (Motorways of Europe) and money from the sixth Italian protocol will be used to widen the Mizieb-Pwales-Mellieha bypass as Malta's northern link - the spectre of more virgin land falling victim to mismanaged road construction works spilling over is looming yet again, in the light of the Burmarrad works experience.

Alternattiva Demokratika immediately expressed its concern over the proposed cutting through Pwales Valley and through ridges of the proposed tunnel, which would also exacerbate the construction waste problem. The upgrading of the existing roads, such as the Xemxija one, should avert any new road proposals.

A prominent vehicle manufacturing firm's advert should raise quite some eyebrows, for the wrong reasons. Brazenly plastered on the side of a bus shelter in Mosta, it asks: "Still using public transport? Why not think of purchasing the following car..." or something to that effect.

Rather than using the ubiquitous presence of bus shelters to relay a positive message, this firm instead chose to denigrate public transport even further, which for all of its shortcomings, could help solve our daunting traffic and air pollution problems.

Hunters' cheek

Last Sunday's highlights included a protest by the hunters' federation over the demolition of trapping hides at Pembroke and Qrejtën. Having read this, I frantically searched the MEPA Website for any application on the lines of "Application for an illegal trapping hide on public land (hence making me a squatter) - granted".

However, predictably enough, my search was to no avail. Hence, the authorities (Minister George Pullicino), rather than buckling in, should bite the bullet and evict once and for all such arrogant mobsters from public recreational places such as Mtahleb, Bahrija, Dingli and Mnajdra - the country's new leaders should now translate their pledges to give priority to the environment into tangible actions by acting on the wishes of vast non-hunting majority of this country!

Silver linings

One cannot but commend the pro-active stance of various correspondents. Ms Mary Pryce (The Sunday Times, April 4) makes an impassioned plea to halt further building development in these islands: "Do we preserve the things we once held so dear? No... we build" and "We should not allow what little unspoiled land we have in Malta to be pillaged by the greedy without first considering the greater good of the country"... sublime!

Also worth mentioning is Mr S. Mifsud's contribution (also April 4), condemning the replacing of national plant specimens (Widnet il-Bahar) with more 'charismatic' geranium plants in the Marsa roundabouts. Unfortunately, it seems that roundabouts will always be under the hegemony of 'political plant species' - i.e. those which blossom and which grow at a precocious rate! This is somewhat reminiscent of eucalyptus and acacia plantations!

Dates to keep in mind include Saturday, April 24, when the National Commission for Sustainable Development (NCSD) will be launching a consultative process on a Sustainable Development Strategy for Malta, during a one day seminar, and next Wednesday for the BICC Conference "Renewable and Efficient Energy: the Cost Savings at Home".

MEPA is revising its planning policies, first issued in 1988 and subsequently revised in 2000. In fact, the draft policy and design guidance 2004 is currently undergoing a consultation process. The onus within such revisions is on safeguarding open spaces and on landscaping.

One of the hot issues is MEPA's policy to reduce the size of certain units to one bedroom, down to 50 m², in response to changing myth that houses had to have three bedrooms. "Limited land has to be kept in mind during the planning process. Short supply of land makes us see things through a different lens," said Andrew Calleja, MEPA chairman.

According to the proposed new MEPA policy, design has to be an overriding factor in development. For example, MEPA is considering recommending a development that is pleasing to the eye. It also requires that all the open space should be public and at least 40 per cent landscaped. The amendments also protect views in Urban Conservation Areas, which are designated as a priority on design guidelines.

Even in the world of budding economists, environmental acumen is taking centre stage - the Young Enterprise group called YNED from St Aloysius' College embarked on the production and marketing of biodegradable bags, among other products.