

Cowboys call the shots in Gozo



The most recent concrete platform on the rocky coastline at Marsalforn, installed on site on the day of the general election.

A popular ironic cliché is that Gozo is a republic unto itself, with individuals taking unilateral and arbitrary actions being the order of the day.

When it comes to planning infringements, the cliché is actually self-evidently true as, in some areas in Gozo, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and enforcement in general are viewed as impositions from the mother island, existing simply to perpetuate the perception of Gozo as some sort of 'presepju' (crib) where all forms of development or 'progress' are stigmatised.

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In the run-up to the latest general election, and in the immediate aftermath, perpetrators of illegal development grew bolder, according to a familiar practice that is played out before each election.

Coastal areas, such as Dwejra and Marsalforn, seem to have borne the biggest brunt of these bold actions.

On the morning of March 6, heavy machinery was driven down to the Inland Sea at Dwejra to construct a jetty within a few hours, just a stone's throw away from the shingle beach in the inner part of the bay. The jetty was presumably built to replace the existing dilapidated one but there is no planning permit for the development, and consequently Mepa enforcement notice ECF 39/13 was issued.

The rocky coastline on the left side of Marsalforn Bay, known as il-Ponta ta' Santa Marija is slowly but surely being paved over with concrete through a process that started in the 1990s when the 'anonymous' pouring of concrete onto the coastline started.

In 2000, a permit was issued, despite strong objections, for an adjacent boathouse to be built to house water sports equipment. In August 2010, an adjacent cave was furnished with electricity and water supply, despite the lack of a sewerage connection on site, and the cave's dimensions increased considerably following an extensive period of excavation.

Around the same time, planning application PA 5008/10 was submitted to convert the cave into the Panarea Snack Bar, which has recently been approved, despite objections from the Environment Protection Directorate.

Worst still, Żebbuġ local council, which has jurisdiction over Marsalforn, engaged in several unilateral actions on site, presumably with no planning permits in hand, such as relocating an

electricity pole on site, developing a 1.5-metre concrete pavement on the rocky coastline leading to the pole, and deploying heavy machinery on the coastline. Mepa duly issued an enforcement notice – ECF 465/10 – against the local council for the concrete pavement contravention.

The latest twist in this convoluted saga is the recent 'spillage' of concrete, presumably by the Gozo Works Division, literally on the day of the general election day (March 9), just 250 metres away from the other unsightly concrete platform built in the 1990s, for which Mepa issued enforcement notice ECF 45/13, against the Commissioner of Lands.

One hopes that Mepa will act on these two enforcement notices to prevent further scarring and privatisation of the public coastline at Marsalforn.

Space constraints prevent me from writing about other flagrant cases of illegal development taking place at other sites in Gozo, for which enforcement notices have been issued, such as at il-Maxtura in Marsalforn Valley, Xaghra, and il-Grotta, Xlendi.

Gozo was recently ranked by Trip Advisor as sixth in the top 10 European islands to visit. The onus is on us to preserve its integrity for posterity.

New Mepa board – so far so good

After all the theatrics by the Malta Developers Association, which actively sought a place on the Mepa board, it is a relief that the lobby group was excluded, at least on paper, from the recently-appointed Mepa board.

As I have said on numerous occasions, I cannot understand why the MDA is against environmentalists being represented on the board when Malta has been characterised by rampant building development ever since Independence, resulting in the islands achieving a dubious European record when it comes to having a built-up footprint.

In fact, while the average footprint in any other European country is close to five per cent, the local footprint approaches 30 per cent. So the presumption should be against further expanding this footprint.

At the time of writing of this column, the only lacuna in the balanced composition of the Mepa board is the lack of the Opposition representative, who has still not been nominated.

This presents the Nationalist Party with a golden opportunity to regain some of its lost prestige – the party should nominate onto the board someone with environmental leanings rather than the usual architect who simply toes the party line. Such an unconventional decision by the PN would signal that the party is starting to put its money where its mouth is when it comes to the environment.

However, this positive news regarding the Mepa board may easily be unravelled if the revision of the local plans, which has recently been promised by Parliamentary Secretary for Mepa Michael Farrugia, is done insensitively.

This revision should not lead to a further extension of the development boundaries, as happened in the 2006 'rationalisation' exercise, but should be restricted to simply rectifying anomalies where these exist.

Mepa's prompt enforcement

Mepa is frequently, rightly or wrongly, treated like a whipping boy by political parties, NGOs and the public alike. Although the authority does have its shortcomings, its response to illegalities has improved greatly.

For instance, I was recently alerted to an allegedly illegal development taking place at Bingemma and I duly alerted Mepa enforcement, which sent an official on site in record time.

Luckily, it was a false alarm as the development was covered by a permit, but the case demonstrated the unwavering dedication of the enforcement section at Mepa.

Popular natural history course

Nature Trust (Malta) is once again organising its popular natural history course in May and June.

Lectures will touch upon various aspects of local flora and fauna, geology, coastal biodiversity and conservation.

Anyone interested should contact Nature Trust (Malta) president Vince Attard on ceo@naturetrustmalta.org or info@naturetrustmalta.org.

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