

Still no answers



No further development should take place on the fringes of Wied il-Ghasel in Mosta, as for the proposed construction of further workshops along Sir Arthur Borton Street. MEPA should move to remove such land from development schemes to guarantee the valley's integrity.

Although Architect David Pace might consider the matter closed (The Sunday Times, April 10), I certainly disagree, since no answers to my queries have been forthcoming from him. Ours appears to be one of the tightest-lipped democracies, with various entities opting not to answer questions submitted... Lands Department, MEPA, various ministries and now even the Chamber of Architects.

Mr Pace chooses to interpret my first reply to him (February 20) - "I may concede that not all architects hail from the same fold" - as an admission of error while he shies away from the rest of the article in which I lambasted architects on decision boards, such as the DCC, and I urged him to answer some queries.

Mr Pace writes: "Mr Alan Deidun... is free to comment selectively on projects sited in ODZ areas and ignore others which also occupy otherwise pristine land if that is what he wants". So I comment selectively on ODZ projects while ignoring others? Does he mean that I am persuaded to feature certain cases and not others?

I systematically go through all ODZ applications, irrespective of the calibre of the applicant, and my articles of the past three years bear ample testimony to this. Big cheeses like MPs and notorious contractors have featured regularly in my column, as well as 'small fry' applicants.

The ball is again in Mr Pace's court.

MEPA certainly not coping

Recently, MEPA made a call to bolster even further its ranks of environment officers. It was a wise move too since MEPA is not coping with the inundation of complaints, information on illegal development, etc. Many label MEPA as arrogant and disdainful since it fails to acknowledge e-mails, etc. The bottom line (even though it does not concede this) is that MEPA is not in a position to check out every single report, etc - this is all playing in the hands of illegal developers.

In four separate e-mails, Nature Trust (Malta) has forwarded to MEPA circumstances showing at least 20 separate cases of illegal development - the over-stretched enforcement section is understandably slow to react.

Less desk time and more people in the 'field' is what is needed - enforcement people are traditionally the ones with the least clout in the entire hierarchy... this should be rectified if MEPA is to achieve its mission statement.

Bingemma shame

No site is too sacred in our islands for illegal development, it seems. A case in point is Gallina House in Bingemma, limits of Mgarr. The house lies across the road from the picturesque chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Letter which lies on the edge of a rocky outcrop.

The applicant for the development in question has applied for the sanctioning of a reservoir and swimming pool, although the area is an AHLV (Area of High Landscape Value), an ODZ (Outside Development Zone) and of heritage importance and that an enforcement notice has already been issued on the site.

The applicant has failed to state that a high boundary wall has been erected on site. The applicant's proposals have already been rejected by MEPA, with the applicant filing for a reconsideration. Such a case has now been deferred for six months for the most nebulous of

reasons... that the applicant/architect is to submit a new application to sanction the residence! Is MEPA in a position to ensure that the applicant does not make any further additions to the development in the meantime? Cannot MEPA act against such 'procedures' to which architects frequently resort? Cannot the architect in question opt not to represent his client when such a picturesque site is being scarred so blatantly?

So, in layman's terms, first you construct illegally and MEPA duly hands you an enforcement notice. Then, you apply for sanctioning (since in the meantime no enforcement from MEPA's side took place) and the case is deferred for months if you propose to submit new plans. If illegal additions/constructions took place, how can the applicant/architect expect to file for a sanctioning? Do we need to coexist with residences in front of every picturesque location in these islands just because the list of loopholes is endless or because enforcement is so toothless?

I submit such a case to Mr Pace's attention since this is evidently neither a camping site, nor an observatory, a heritage park or a bird sanctuary - the only amenities he chose to mention for ODZ sites.

(This section was compiled with the generous input from Din I-Art Helwa)

Hunting - EU Commission's visit and Ta' Cenc

By now the EU Commission has already visited the islands to gauge for itself the hunting scourge in these islands which, despite numerous cosmetic attempts, both by our authorities and by the hunters' associations themselves, at minimising the problem, is tarnishing Malta's reputation with blood-curdling images of shot protected avifauna.

And our hunters' cheek appears nowhere near being quelled, despite being the envy of their European counterparts due to the spring EU derogation granted to Malta for common turtledove and quail hunting.

One hopes that the Commission was given ample evidence too of the ecological damage wrought by hunters and trappers, with vast swathes of garigue and cliff areas being shorn of any vegetation to spread out nets and build hides and a thorough explanation as to why Ta' Ċenç was not included as a local Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

A silver lining in all this wrinkled affair is the call made by BirdLife (Malta), one of the very first of its genre by the NGO, to safeguard the Ta' Ċenç area, which has for far too long been a pawn in the speculation game.

The NGO is rightly clamouring for the holistic protection of the area, including the surrounding garigue and cliffs, which nurture important Annex 1 (Birds Directive) species, such as Cory's shearwater and yelkouan shearwater, and many other bird species, besides important floral species, such as the endemic Maltese rock centaury.

Despite these ecological gems, only a small part of Ta' Ċenç is currently protected, its protection mainly being hindered by land ownership. In fact, most of the area is privately owned - to this effect, BirdLife has come up with a possible solution - financial compensation for owners so as to cordon off the area for ecological management.

The government should put its money where its mouth is and support the NGO in this compensation scheme to ensure that the proposed golf courses, hotel extensions and residences for the area do not materialise but rather ensure that the site is enjoyed in its pristine state.

Skyrocketing population

It was reported last week that according to an EU projection, Malta's population is set to grow by 27.1% by 2050 to surpass the 500,000 mark, with an increase of 39,000 in just 11 years.

In fact, Malta is only one of four EU countries where an overall population increase is forecast, along with Ireland, Luxembourg and Cyprus. Ironically, while big countries like Germany, France, Spain and Italy will all register a population decline, Malta, with a very high population density and limited land resources, is posting the highest population increase in the EU.

Even with a population of 400,000, we have scarred these islands beyond recognition - we can only speculate what we will be able to 'achieve' in terms of environmental degradation with a 500,000-strong population! Such news will further strengthen those pushing for more roads, housing units and all forms of concrete paraphernalia in our islands, with little consideration for the large number of vacant dwellings and other sobering statistics for our islands.

One must bear in mind that the issue has two aspects: while more people need more facilities like roads, housing, etc., they also need more recreation such as free open spaces where to roam, rather than 'alien' promenades, public gardens, shopping gardens, etc., where to unwind. The onus is on our planning authorities to better safeguard our remaining pockets of 'pristine' land.

A great, Green Pope

A great Pope, John Paul II, has passed away, as evidenced from the many outpourings of grief and sympathy from all faiths and corners of the earth.

I choose to laud the late Pope in my own way - he was inextricably tied to the beauty of nature and certainly prodded the faithful to endorse the protection of God's creation as a cornerstone of their faith... quite a shell-shock for many Catholics.

During a visit to UNEP's headquarters in Nairobi in 1985, John Paul II stated: "The Church's commitment to the conservation and improvement of our environment is linked to a command of God". The Pope continued with his spearthrust when on January 1, 1990 (World Peace Day) he completed one of the master documents of environmental awareness - i.e. "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation", where he declared that "all Christians in particular realise that their duty towards nature and creation is an essential part of their faith".

Silver linings

Call for greener cars. The Minister for Urban Development and Roads, Jesmond Mugliett, is to be commended for appealing to car agents, at the opening of the 16th Motor Fair, to explore the possibility of importing environment-friendly cars which could work on electricity or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), or hybrid vehicles which run on more than one source of power, such as petrol-electric and diesel-electric.

The Chamber of Engineers also gets the Green thumbs-up for giving its annual engineering conference a green infusion by choosing the theme "Engineering: Clean and Green", in which details about offshore wind farms, biodiesel, hybrid cars, energy-from-waste techniques, etc., were given.

HSBC has further strengthened its Green credentials but organising the North-South-East-West exhibition on climate change - HSBC is certainly taking the bull by the horns when it comes to tackling climate change, as evidenced from its drive to become carbon-neutral in purchasing energy from renewable sources, reducing use of paper in its operations and also by entering in financial partnerships with entities such as the universities of Newcastle and East Anglia to further research on this pressing matter.

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