

Ta' Cenc - the heat is on



GIANNI, a farmer from Sannat, who has tilled the land at Ta' Cenc for over 30 years, has now been elbowed out of the way by the new owner of the land. He is seen with Victor Galea, AD's co-ordinator in Gozo.

"Within a relatively small area, one can see much of what the Maltese countryside has to offer and one can appreciate the integration of man and nature, which has shaped the Maltese landscape over the millennia" (EIS Baseline Ecology - Terrestrial - Study, point 1.165)

THE Gozitan version of omertà could explain the somewhat subdued response from Gozo to the Ta' Cenc proposals so far. I say 'so far' factor, since, late on Wednesday (at the time of writing), all omertà will be swept under the carpet as the Sannat Residents Association hold their much-awaited public consultation exercise.

Not that the association did not find any obstacles to hold the meeting - for example, shortly before the meeting (due to be held at Sannat primary school), the association was first informed that it had to apply formally (in writing) for permission to use the school premises; once the association wrote, it was informed by the Education Division that it was not possible to have such a meeting with political representatives in a public school - it was eventually held elsewhere.

Those striving to stop Sannat residents from making their views known regarding the issue eventually got cold feet. In what has become a well-rehearsed script, the developer entertained some Sannat residents to refreshments, on the eve of the meeting - another coincidence?

With the help of Ferdinand Demicoli and Victor Galea I have compiled the following information:

The area covered by the proposed Ta' Cenc development makes up 2.5% of the total surface area of Gozo and roughly 5% of its coastline. This should make it eligible for scrutiny by a Strategic Impact Assessment.

Environment Minister George Pullicino recently stated that the development of the proposed Aquaculture Zone off Marsascalea did not warrant an SIA since it "is not part of a policy change". If Structure Policy TOU 10 is not implemented fully, then the Ta' Cenc issue will entail a policy change and a SIA will be inevitable, hopefully.

According to proposals, the existing hotel is set to increase from the current 0.89 ha to a massive 2.01 ha, with the addition of 66 units to the existing 63 (hence, a doubling of existing facilities). The hotel already takes up 8.99% of the total footprint of the area.

Two new hotels - Sannat Hotel and Palazzo Palina - are also being proposed, in addition to 49 new bungalows (Ta' Gruwa villas)

Zone 2, or the heritage park, will not be easily accessible to the public but only to those actively involved in scientific research, for example.

4.2% of Zone 3 (the interpretation stage) is taken up by the building itself, with no provision being made for the car park.

17.13% of Zone 4 (or 6.86% of the total Ta' Cenc area) will be taken up by 67 villas, each set on a tumulo of land. No details about the sewage system catering for these villas, been provided. Most probably, some trenching works will have to be conducted to link the villas to the new sewage treatment plant at Ras il-Hobz or to Xewkija, hence widening the impact outside the confines of Ta' Cenc.

The developer has asked for Zone 7 (the agrotourism/golf course area) not to be included in the remit of the current EIS study - this is objectionable in that one holistic study on site must

be conducted to be able to gauge better the impact on the site. This might be just conjecture on my part, but the developer might be banking on a positive outcome for the first application, hence effectively paving the way for the golf course/agrotourism application. One study, including both aspects of the development, should be conducted - MEPA should be adamant about this.

Despite the developer's assurances that farmers have renounced their right to work the land within the site, at least one farmer - Ganni Tabone - has been evicted from the land in the most subtle of ways. In fact, although it was Real Finanz, the former Italian owners of the Ta' Cenc site, who effectively terminated his agricultural lease, they still tolerated his presence. Once the present developer came into the picture, Tabone was told to leave after having tilled the land for more than 30 years. No wonder the same farmer feels aggrieved.

The proposed project site is divided into eight zones: Zone 7 is designated as a golf course/agrotourism facilities. Zone 8 is merely considered by the developer as an extension/addendum of Zone 7. Zone 6 is a 'protected area'. Part of this, however, consists of a corridor sandwiched between two large chunks of Zone 7. Fully-fledged protected areas are normally surrounded by buffer zones - as proposed, part of Zone 6 would be shorn of any buffer from the disruptive activities ensuing in Zone 7, such as irrigation, use of fertilisers and pesticides, introduction of alien species, etc.

The proposed area includes floral species listed in the Red Data Book. Thirty-two, 65 and 19 such species were recorded from the ecological survey conducted at Mgarr ix-Xini, Ras in-Newwiela and Wied Sabbar respectively (either endemic species, endangered ones or species with a restricted distribution in the Mediterranean), while a total of 21 faunal species listed in the RDB were recorded from the entire area.

The Ecology Baseline Study states that a thorough faunal survey for the area is needed since none has been conducted to date - this should preclude the taking of any decision at the moment.

The same study states that "for the nature lover, the Ta' Cenc area has much to offer... since the area has great educational value". So why cordon it off for most of the public, as is being proposed? The study also states that "by local standards, the Ta' Cenc area is relatively remote from the urban centres of Gozo... and gives the visitor a sense of open space and wilderness". So why construct on such a massive scale?

According to CZM 3, the main bulwark against coastal squatting, "public access around the coastline immediately adjacent to the sea or at the top of cliffs (including in bays, harbours, and creeks) will be secured. This will include taking shorelands into public ownership, Government acquisition of illegal developments and encroachments, and suitable construction works. In the few cases where this is not practical (for example where security considerations are paramount), nearby detours will be established. All the coastline will be brought into public ownership within a specified period."

This policy appears to have been yet another unpalatable hurdle for the developer. In fact, the same EIS states that hunting, trapping, agriculture, picnics and barbeques, etc. would be incompatible with the proposed developments. While I may agree with the first two points, I beg to differ for the rest, since the Ta' Cenc area is an important recreational site for those visitors who enjoy walking in natural surroundings (as stated in the Ecology Baseline Study, point 1.172).

With the writing on the wall (i.e. taking shorelands into public ownership), why is Government not acting on recommendations in the Structure Plan and gradually purchase all the land at Ta' Cenc from the developer, Victor Borg?

Despite the prohibitive sum that might be asked for the land, the move would surely prove popular. One cannot fathom how the country lacks the funds to buy off such a sizable portion of the Gozitan coastline to hand it back to the public for its enjoyment.

In the non-technical summary of the EIS drawn up for the project, no traces of any international market survey to justify the development are available. There appears to have been no consultation of international tour operators, prospective holidaymakers/buyers/ investors in foreign countries, etc.

The EIA speaks of "81% of qualified Maltese respondents" but does not identify the qualification. (Volume 1, page 1-33). This 'project feasibility' appears to be a recurrent hurdle for local white elephants, which often fail miserably to justify the carte blanche they are clamouring for. This might lead one to think that the only true reason fuelling the proposals is speculation, rather than genuine concern for the Gozitan tourism sector.

This in spite of all the pandering by the developer to Gozitans that the project will benefit them economically, since their children will be gainfully employed as chambermaids, barmen, construction workers, etc., the only kind of work available to young people in Gozo. If, as can be easily surmised, the majority of these jobs are closely related to the hotel operations, why has the developer felt the need to build villas?

Quoting from the same summary, "The current state of the existing facilities is such that the quality of the product is not sufficient... the rooms, suites and public areas require upgrading". Why the hotel administration is seeking to expand its operations in view of yawning economic difficulties raises more than one eyebrow. In addition, the same summary speaks of the

"announced loss of a substantial number of five-star beds in Gozo" - why then choose to delve deeper into the ailing tourism sector?

On the other hand, Structure Policy TOU 10 could be the trump card that the developer had been hoping for, since it identifies the Ta' Cenc area as "Malta's first national park covering the majority of the area from the east of Mgarr ix-Xini inlet to the village of Sannat".

However, the same policy states that any further tourist hotel development should take place near the existing Ta' Cenc Hotel, effectively sounding the death knell for the panoply of villas and bungalows being proposed for the area, since these are detached from the existing hotel.

The same policy also identifies the need to carefully mitigate the impacts of such development and that the national park should have a nature emphasis, including both the protection and enhancement of the natural environment and other heritage items, particularly archaeological remains; a limited amount of careful restocking with species of flora and fauna indigenous to the Maltese Islands; a visitor centre and interpretive facilities. It does not make any reference to villas, bungalows and the lot.

Hence, policy TOU 10 should be implemented as soon as possible, as recommended in the EIS Ecology Baseline Study, but implemented in its entirety, with all the strings and trappings attached - the developer should not cling to such a policy by denuding it of any of its clout. Needless to say, the proposed villas, hotel extensions and the lot will not undoubtedly mushroom in the future, as is the local practice, with a permit being used as a precedent for more to follow.

So, thumbs up to Malta's first heritage park, as long as it is free from the construction of further villas, bungalows and hotel extensions. These concrete paraphernalia are not essential components of a heritage park. On second thoughts, however, I doubt whether the developer will court the heritage park at Ta' Cenc idea any longer in the absence of the mouth-watering allure of these constructions.

Just have a glimpse at www.adgozo.com/TaCenc.pps or www.adgozo.com/tacenc or <http://adgozo.com/TaCenc.swf> to see what's in the offing, but do so on an empty stomach, if possible.

Silver linings

Bahrija poles removed - On December 22, Enemalta removed a series of illegally installed electricity poles from the scenic countryside of Bahrija after the Ramblers Association and The Times raised the issue with MEPA. In fact, an enforcement notice (ENF 652/05) has been pending since August for the route which leads to a Bronze Age village and which is marketed as an MTA walk. It seems that the pledge by Minister Pullicino to clamp down on illegal buildings is bearing fruit - when will boathouses be addressed?

Young Enterprise Project - Fusion, a Junior College Young Enterprise company taking part in this year's HSBC company programme, has developed an innovative use for waste paper. It is producing waste paper bins out of used, printed material and other recyclable materials. Fusion's aim is to help raise awareness about recycling while showing that environmental awareness can be the basis for a successful business. www.fusionmalta.com.

Wildlife posters in bars - Over 1,000 bars and restaurants have been given posters promoting the protection of the environment. This MEPA promotional campaign is designed to acquaint the public with simple national treasures, such as the iris, the blue rock thrush and the dolphin among others. The posters for bars and restaurants are made of environment-friendly materials. Each set is made up of six species of flora and fauna, which are endangered also due to indiscriminate littering and dumping.

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