

The Green Whistle-Blower

For those who are not exactly conversant with planning jargon, an ODZ (outside development zone) refers to a site which lies outside the development schemes as originally outlined by the Structure Plan and later confirmed by the various Local Plans.

It was originally agreed that an ODZ should not be developed - a decision which is nevertheless frequently being reversed in Malta.

Upon rekindling the issuing of a permit for the development of an elderly people's home, chapel and substation in Mellieha with no Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) being carried out, I shall quote an interesting decision by the European Commission which runs in the same vein.

In fact the European Commission is to take the UK Government to court over its failure to require an EIA for a planned multiplex cinema in Crystal Palace Park - two years after developers agreed to scrap the project.

London's Green MP Jean Lambert says that "The effects of this decision could be far-reaching. If the court decides against the government it will be forced to make wholesale changes to planning law, affecting developments across the country.

"Essentially, planning decisions will have to ask whether there is a need for developments on this scale in the first place - and this decision makes clear that local people will have to be involved in the decision-making process."

This statement should send jitters down the spines of our pampered property speculators, dealers and architects. Such a landmark decision, if applied to Malta, would spare us the many tourist and commercial development eyesores around our islands.

I do not know if it's sheer coincidence or pure Machiavellian timing but the number of dubious development applications has mushroomed on the eve of the election.

Yet another application concerns the building of two flats and two apartments in an ODZ over Wied Mejxu in Pembroke. So, after the degradation of Wied Ghomor and Wied Ghollieqa in the area, we now sink our teeth into Wied Mejxu!

Another application concerns demolishing part of Comino Hotel for eventual reconstruction. If the same original footprint is maintained, there should be no objection. But one can only suspect a ploy to expand the hotel's premises.

A whole year has passed since the first demolition of the illegal flight of steps at the Golden Bay Internet Café. They have since been reconstructed under the kind patronage of our authorities. Is no one able to stand up and enforce the law? This forgotten sin should not be allowed to fizzle away.

Where an ODZ is concerned, no applications for development should be even accepted in the first place, to avoid any possible legal loopholes. Why declare an ODZ when its status is not respected?

Nature Trust's election memorandum

In preparation for electoral crunch time, Nature Trust presented its memorandum to all political parties with viable proposals as to how to improve our environment.

The document skirts major environmental issues, including law enforcement, nature protection, land use, solid waste generation, air and water quality, bird protection and problems inherent to the marine environment.

It also includes proposals on how to bolster environmental education and the participation of civil society in these islands. It calls for the introduction of Green wardens, the beefing up of the Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE) unit, a halt on permits in ODZs, more environmental law enforcement in Gozo and tougher fines for dumping offences.

The environment, partly thanks to green NGOs, has shot up to the top of the political agenda, with political figures dabbling in green issues previously thought to be fanatics' topic.

Greenwashing is the order of the day since the environment has suddenly grown attractive to politics. Let's augur that our proposals receive adequate coverage by the political big guns. We do not expect lip service but concrete promises which must be kept. We look forward to the implementation of at least some of our proposals by any future administration.

Golfing revisited

Insistent rumours are circulating that a decision on the Rabat Tal-Virtù golf course is to be made soon after the election.

It is important not to let all the valid arguments put forward to allay such a golf course away from Tal-Virtù, and our islands as a whole, die down.

The Verdala golf course issue has been taken up by Friends of the Earth as one of their cyberaction campaigns, and signing your opposition to the golf course project can help prevent it. Visit the Website www.foei.org/cyberaction/t"_blank", and sign on.

Figures released at the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan, revealed that the United States is, by far, the world's most profligate user of water, besides notorious fossil fuels, such as oil.

Much of the US's unhappy predicament is due to its staggering 23,000 golf courses, most of them centred in the western US, an area classed by the World Water Assessment Programme as under "severe water stress".

Golf is a highly wasteful way of using water, an essential, precious dwindling resource, despite all the water sources (such as boreholes) golfing advocates point to, especially in Malta where the mean rainfall is not far off desert conditions.

Maltese hunters go international

The Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE) unit added yet another feather to its cap when it managed to intercept two suitcases containing over 200 skins of protected birds with a street value of around Lm8,000.

The two men were returning from a hunting trip to Egypt, a country which banned Maltese hunters in the early 1990s following a campaign by BBC Wildlife.

Among the skins found were those of white pelican, white stork, black stork, Egyptian vulture, spur wing plovers, kingfishers, great white egrets, eagle owl, spoonbills and long-legged buzzard. The skins were ready to be stuffed and mounted.

It is really mind-boggling that our tourism authorities do not raise a single note of disapproval at this wanton tarnishing of Malta's image abroad.

The influential BBC magazine describes Maltese hunters as "decimating bird populations at Lake Nasser, near Abu Simbel and Lake Qarun in the Fayoum region" and asks for letters of protest to be sent to the Egyptian government to control the influx of Maltese hunters.

I am curious to know what financial penalty the two perpetrators, hailing from Zejtun and Zabbar, will be asked to pay to compensate for such an outrage and deter such future bird massacres.

The penalty should reflect the grievous harm done to both the protected bird population and Malta's image abroad. A fine of just a few hundred liri would surely not suffice, considering the expense involved in going abroad on these expeditions. One also wonders why the various hunters' associations did not bat an eyelid, let alone condemn these actions.

News from the marine world

Nature Trust denounces the official green light given to the importation of two Patagonian sea lions for the Mediterraneo animal park facilities.

These facilities are grossly inadequate for such animals. The holding tanks are too shallow and small, as testified by the recorded death of two (if not more) sea lions within the same premises at Bahar ic-Caghaq.

Animals should never be confined for human enjoyment, irrespective of how well such animals are treated by their caretakers. The enticing of children by using 'charismatic' animals such as sea lions is really a highly unfair way of distorting reality.

Proper legislation to monitor the integrity of confined animals should be introduced before more of such animals are imported in our islands.

Documentaries portraying teeming life beneath the ocean create a deceptively rosy impression. That's the message in a new campaign, called "Shifting baselines: the truth about ocean decline", from a group of filmmakers and scientists.

The campaign aims to use a Website - www.shiftingbaselines.org (which made its public debut on February 24) to reveal the damage hidden beneath the waves.

The campaign's leader, Los Angeles-based filmmaker Randy Olson, says "there has not been a conspiracy to suppress this message, but rather, poor public education has prevented it from getting out.

"More than a quarter of all coral reefs are now dead and the majority of the world's fisheries are in severe decline," he says.

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) revealed that in Croatia (the second Mediterranean country after Spain in terms of amount of farmed tuna, with an annual production of 3,000 tons), the Environment Ministry listed tuna farms as presenting dangers to underwater ecosystems in its annual report on facilities hazardous to human health.

This, the first official position on the ecological risks of tuna farming, surely sets a precedent which other Mediterranean governments should aspire to mirror.

SMART supermarket receives my thumbs up for its environmental initiatives. These include the introduction of recyclable shopping bags and the use of recycling deposit facilities on their premises for glass, metal, paper and plastics.

Let's augur that this serves as a spur for other private entities to seriously start tackling the waste problem.