

Turning the tide in the south



The official opening of the Xrobb I-Għagin park should hopefully signal a profound transformation of the Delimara peninsula.

Despite Malta's glaringly obvious physical constraints, the local mindset still seems to discriminate between the island's different geographical regions.

Arguably, the most distinctive of these regions is the 'south' of Malta, which has long been recognised as the islands' environmental pin-cushion – it is the site for power stations, a large concentration of quarries and car scrapyards, fish farms, the Freeport, the airport, the largest industrial estate, and so forth, but very little by way of tourism infrastructure.

Against this backdrop the official opening of the Xrobb I-Għagin Nature Park and Sustainability Centre in Delimara last weekend is a red letter day indeed.

The opening was orchestrated by Nature Trust with the collaboration of the Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs, Parks, HSBC and the University's Faculty of Engineering, courtesy of a significant financial grant from Norway and the European Economic Area.

The aims of the park are twofold: the conservation of the ecologically sensitive areas on site and promoting environmental education by providing hostel facilities to host weekend visits by groups of schoolchildren in an evocative natural setting.

Sustainability underscores every aspect of the Xrobb I-Għagin park – in fact, a vast array of devices, ranging from solar pipes, photovoltaic panels, solar water heaters and two wind turbines, have been deployed to harvest the maximum amount of renewable energy possible.

In addition, there will be a large underground water reservoir to tap rainfall, while a water biological treatment facility will ensure that all wastewater from the park facilities is converted into second-class water fit for irrigation and flushing purposes.

The park's opening has long been anticipated in Parliament – for instance, in 2008 and again in 2010, parliamentary assistant Franco Debono had lauded and urged the development of such a park within a holistic strategy aimed at dispelling the notion that Malta's south was some sort of scorched earth when it came to environmental conservation.

As rightly highlighted in two of his parliamentary speeches, the Delimara peninsula offers visitors a diverse showcase of stunning coastal views and expanses of garigue, as well as historical remains and fortifications, where people can really 'get away from it all'.

Incidentally, I stumbled across Debono's parliamentary speeches only by coincidence, and this underscores the need to improve the access to such speeches, possibly even making them available in video format.

In one such speech, Debono mentioned the Nationalist Party's electoral promise 180, which referred to the setting up of an animal rehabilitation clinic at Xrobb I-Għagin to treat injured turtles and marine mammals, a development which should hopefully soon materialise.

It also referred to the need to promote the ecotourism potential of the whole Delimara peninsula, from the Punic remains at Tas-Silġ to Lantern Point.

Debono coined the term 'southernmost south' ('is-south tas-south'), in a figurative rather than strictly geographical sense, in an attempt to put the environmental deficit within the Marsaxlokk-Birżebbuġa area on the national agenda. He was also the only government backbencher to speak during the power station extension debate and he vehemently criticised certain procedural aspects, advocating the use of diesel or gas for the power station extension.

Since the Delimara area has been neglected for years, the opening of the Xrobb I-Għaġin park, which also entailed the planting of about 15,000 trees over a period of three years, should serve to cast some welcome light on the plight of the 'south of the south'.

It is not a panacea but it is surely a step in the right direction, especially its emphasis on alternative and cleaner energy sources at a site literally a stone's throw away from the power station.

www.alandeidun.eu