

## A thousand Manoel Islands...



Manoel Island, where the public is being elbowed out.

The recent publication by MIDI of its long-awaited plans for Manoel Island has understandably ruffled many feathers since they essentially propose the fencing off, behind a 2.2m-high mesh, of large swathes of the island, under the ruse that they will be guaranteeing public access to the foreshore.

The further tightening of private control on a prime site like Manoel Island has hogged the media's limelight and even warranted concrete actions by a sizeable group of people on site, probably by virtue of the island's central position and proximity to residential areas. All commendable actions still, especially given the sobering scenario that is unfolding within this part of Marsamxett Harbour, a scenario which involves the gradual elbowed out of the public through schemes catering for those with wads of cash.

But as soon as one ventures some kilometres outside the urban perimeter, the awareness about the need to safeguard public access fizzles away. Take the Ras il-Knejjes/Ras ir-Raheb area... for many a backwater along with north-western cliffs, with the hamlet of Baħrija being the closest settlement. The site owes its colourful epithet to the numerous archaeological artefacts retrieved on site, which might suggest its previous status as an important pilgrimage and religious ritual site. The site also regales the visitor with timeless views of the stunning coastline in the area.



The gate at Baħrija.

Despite this, the only access road leading to the site has been fenced off by farmers citing frequent mounds of litter left behind by frolicking families, much to the angst of ramblers and anglers who cherish the cliff edge for different reasons.

The latter categories rightly contend that the fencing off, although apparently legal (i.e. backed by an approved planning application), might also be indirectly keeping prying eyes (including those of enforcement authorities) away from ongoing bird trapping activities on site.

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It is indeed ironic that those fighting tooth and nail to preserve traditional hobbies ('delizzji') during the last spring hunting referendum are the same individuals now advocating the

cordoning off of prime coastal sites to the detriment of some of these hobbies (rambling and angling).

The tussle between ramblers and presumably land owners or squatters over Ras ir-Raġeb is at least 15-20 years long in the tooth. During a meeting held with the Ramblers Association in 2006, then Minister for Justice and Home Affairs Tonio Borg had stated that “areas that have been taken over by the government through a presidential proclamation prior to 1994, even though not paid for by the government, such as Ras ir-Raġeb, can be legally accessed by the public and not even the owner can prohibit access”.

Still, the status quo prevails at Ras ir-Raġeb and neither the PL nor the PN, which are basically concerned only about critical voter masses, have deemed it worthwhile to campaign for the opening up of such a backwater.

## **Paving the way for land reclamation?**

The president of the Malta Development Association, Sandro Chetcuti, recently asserted that local quarry owners need financial incentives (read: payments/subsidies from taxpayers' money) to be cajoled into opening up their hollowed-out quarry areas to the dumping of inert construction waste. This came in the wake of a statement made by Environment Minister José Herrera to the effect that “government will issue a legal notice to requisition the quarry volume for construction waste – for which quarry owners will be compensated – and the Environment Resources Authority will issue notices informing those who refuse to accept construction waste without a valid reason that their licence will be suspended”.

The current impasse involves the lack of adequate disposal sites for construction waste such that a number of public construction projects could not kick-off.

There are a number of mind-boggling issues to consider here. For instance, what happened to the condition normally imposed upon quarry owners on being granted a quarrying licence, that the quarried area had to be reclaimed once it was exhausted?

As rightly commented online by some pundits, construction waste generation can be curbed through a cooling off of the current construction frenzy, a prospect which the MDA will surely not entertain as they contend that the perpetual view of cranes on the skyline is an indicator of economic growth.

The demands being made by the quarry owners lobby effectively means that the same owners will laugh all the way to the bank, having profited from the sale of the stone resource over the years (a ‘commons’, or shared resource, which has been inadequately priced over the years) only to demand payment just to allow reclamation of the same quarries, as otherwise they would develop the same space into warehouses, garages and the works (permissible under current policies).

This is ludicrous were it not tragic at the same time since it is playing into the hands of those vultures pushing the land reclamation agenda, with the dumping of millions of tons of construction waste into the sea to generate high-value real estate on reclaimed land being touted as a possible panacea to the current crisis.

Disposing of our construction waste at sea is no long-term solution, as concluded by the two previous studies commissioned by previous administrations on the same issue, beside increasing exponentially the footprint of the environmental impact.