

## Change is possible, with the right mindset - Alan Deidun



More than 1,000 objections lodged by the public have staved off, at least for now, proposed soil excavation works within the ecologically important Tal-Wej, wedged between Mosta and Naxxar.

The lodging of a planning application for the excavation of soil (presumably to assess the archaeological value of the area but which would have opened a can of worms) within the ecologically important Tal-Wej area, wedged between Naxxar and Mosta, generated a groundswell of public sentiment. This culminated in more than a thousand objections being submitted by the public.

Environmental NGOs, who were instrumental in drumming up support for the objection campaign, managed to convey the message that the Tal-Wej area is worth conserving by virtue of the raft of indigenous species and habitats it hosts.

This already constitutes a victory in itself given the public's generally low appreciation of biodiversity-related matters. But earlier this week, the applicant also withdrew the plans, capping off a successful outcome on this issue.

The scene is now set for the protection of the area's biological assets to be formalised by strengthening the site's designated status and warding off any future incursions on its integrity.

### Plastic-free shopping

The tide of change is being experienced elsewhere too. For instance, a supermarket chain in the Netherlands has taken the landmark decision to introduce at least one plastic-free aisle within its outlets, with the over 700 items featured within such aisles being packaged with compostable materials, metal, glass and cardboard.

This move, which hopefully will lead to a watershed of similar initiatives within the retail sector, does not come as a complete surprise, given Teresa May's recommendation for supermarket plastic-free aisles last January in her 25-year environmental strategy for the UK. Some British MPs are calling for the current ban on single-use plastic bags to be extended to disposable coffee cups as well.

And the anti-plastic revolution does not stop there. The organisers of the annual Glastonbury music festival, which draws hordes of young people, have announced that they will be banning plastic bottles as from 2019. This comes against the backdrop of the EU launching its strategy to make all plastics used within its borders recyclable by 2030.

Oil giants too are taking stock of the current global anti-plastic sentiment. BP's chief economist is quoted as stating that the current global drive to phase out single-use plastics will dent oil demand (although global increases in demand will still be registered). Single-use plastics guzzle 15 per cent of all non-combustible oil in the form of petrochemicals.

The time is ripe for everyone to make the switch away from plastic.

### Will reason prevail at Għarb too?

The recent decision by the Environment Review Tribunal, which essentially serves as an appeals board, to yet again rebuff PA 05333/07 for the development of an elderly peoples' residential home within Quarry Number 11 in Wied Ghomor, has been met with rapturous support from many quarters.

Although at face value this application appears innocuous, with some even arguing that a quarry rehabilitation is desirable, the proposal extended outside the confines of the quarry. One-third of the footprint lay on public land and the development necessitated the opening of a new access road through the valley (proposed for inclusion as a Public Domain site and scheduled for its environmental assets) to San Gwann.

A formidable coalition of NGOs – which brought environmentalists and the hunting lobby together – and local councils objected to the proposal, which had recently been given a lifeline following an initial dismissal in 2016.

As can be appreciated from one the photos here, nature was slowly but surely reclaiming the quarry crater.

*The battle might have been won at Wied Ghomor but the war for the valley rages on*

The battle might have been won at Wied Ghomor but the war for the valley rages on, with a bevy of planning applications for ODZ parcels having been submitted over the past few months.

A decade-old planning application for the development of an old peoples' nursery home in an ODZ area at Għarb, just a stone's throw away from the Ta' Pinu shrine, has been re-exhumed, understandably raising the ire of the local community.

The number of ODZ applications for such homes has spiralled in recent years, with the Planning Authority refusing late last year to accede to an extra two floors to existing ODZ homes, arguing that this move would end up emarginating the elderly even more by herding them away from urban centres.

However, no blanket prohibition on further ODZ homes was announced by the PA. Similar planning applications have been submitted for sites in Santa Luċija and in Vittoriosa, with recent ones being approved in Għargħur and in Naxxar.

Will a concerted effort similar to the one witnessed for Wied Ghomor be invested in opposing plans for the Għarb ODZ area? The daunting challenge is to maintain constant vigilance, everywhere, always...

## **No end to fuel station boom**

Hardly has the dust settled on the latest approvals for gargantuan fuel stations at Magħtab (limits of Naxxar) and Marsascala than further similar planning applications are clamouring for a decision, given that the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study has been completed.

In particular, ODZ sites in Luqa (Qormi Road) and Iklın (tal-Balal) appear to be the next to be notched up in the increasing tally of approved fuel stations on the island.

The two applications bear uncanny similarities: (i) they both target the maximum footprint permissible under the current abuse-prone policy, i.e. 3,000 square metres (which definitely marks a quantum leap from the estimated 50 square metres that fuel stations currently occupy); (ii) they both target ODZ sites, despite the policy prescribing that such sites should be the last resort; (iii) they both lie less than 500m away from operating fuel stations, with both dribbling past this constraint by exploiting a loophole in the policy which makes an exception for fuel stations sites on opposite sides of the road; and (iv) neither of them constitutes a relocation of an existing fuel station but is simply a spanking new one.

The natural thing for the PA to do would be to put pending fuel stations in abeyance, at least until the ongoing fuel station policy revision process, triggered by Environment Minister Herrera, has been completed.

There are precedents for applying such a 'temporary moratorium'. Prior to the approval in 2014 of the current policy on fireworks factories, the pending applications for such factories had been put on ice.

So why doesn't the PA apply the same approach for fuel stations?