

Collective amnesia at Dwejra



The haphazard parking at Dwejra should be regulated to avoid offroad excursions onto sensitive sites; unlike the Azure Window collapse, this issue is within our control.

The recent public outpouring of grief over the collapse of the Azure Window, the iconic geological structure at Dwejra, is revealing indeed, especially in terms of the country's inability to properly prioritise environmental issues.

While we are engrossed in the collective tear-shedding exercise, scarcely a thought is spared for the round-the-clock pillaging that takes place just a stone's throw away from the collapsed window due to the deployment of trammel nets (parit) in what should be the core zone of a Marine Protected Area (MPA). Divers visiting the site have for decades been deploring the fact that the MPA at Dwejra exists only on paper, to the extent that during their dives they are often faced with a wall of nets that effectively rob the sea of any large fish.

As the accompanying photo shows, the formal car park at Dwejra is not coping, especially during summer when a procession of coaches laden with camera-toting tourists make their way to the site. Street vendors at the site have also multiplied over the years. The bottom line is that private cars are parked haphazardly over natural vegetation, fuelling a degradation of the site and further eroding the thin, precious veneer of topsoil characterising most of the Dwejra coastal area.



The real tragedy at Dwejra is the non-existence of a Marine Protected Area (MPA), with trammel nets (parit) still the order of the day in what should be a conservation and divers' paradise.

Offroad parking at Dwejra should be prevented through the installation of roadside bollards, coupled with a regular shuttle service ferrying prospective visitors to Dwejra from a point at San Lawrenz once the car park carrying capacity at Dwejra has been reached. The Gozo Ministry should be racking its brains about procuring the necessary funds to address traffic flows in the Dwejra area rather than coming up with hairbrained proposals to improve access to the Wied il-Mielaħ arch.

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If anything, the collapse of the Dwejra arch should serve as a wake-up call to nudge us into adopting urgent management measures to reverse ongoing environmental degradation on site. Unlike the arch's collapse, the latter is within our control.

Attempt to close off public access at Wardija

Development application PA 04363/16 proposes the construction of rubble walls and an access gate at a site located over a rocky outcrop/hillock commanding outstanding views of the surrounding countryside at Wardija, known to rambling enthusiasts as il-Hotba ta' Gaba. The strategic nature of the site was recognised by the British Army, which had installed a cannon battery on site to defend St Paul's Bay.

The seemingly innocuous planning application was rejected by the Planning Authority on the grounds that it went counter to Policy 2.9 of the normally permissive Rural Policy and Design Guidelines of 2014 besides being unjustified in terms of the Strategic Plan for the Environment and Planning (Sped). In fact, the site is not agricultural in nature, as candidly observed in the case officer's report, it is dominated by maquis and garrigue vegetation, and is actually leased to third parties by the government for agricultural use (although no traces of farming practice are to be observed on site).

The late Lino Bugeja and the Ramblers Association has vehemently objected to the cordoning off of the site, which offers such panoramic views. The St Paul's Bay local council had also objected.

Undeterred, this rebuttal is being appealed through the usual suspect, namely architect Robert Musumeci, who will invariably challenge the rejection along legalistic lines, giving scant consideration to the site's natural and landscape value and to the ODZ policies he himself helped formulate. One hopes that the three-member ERT (Appeals) Tribunal does not cave in to such arguments.

ODZ valley in Vittoriosa under threat from development

The Planning Authority's recent refusal to sanction Joe Gaffarena's Qormi petrol station contraventions is commendable, and might have gobsmacked some people given the applicant's profile, although very few alternatives to sanctioning are on the plate at the moment.

No sooner did the dust start to settle on this decision than the PA board was asked to complete its initial processing of an application for an old peoples' residential home smack in the middle of an Outside Development Zone valley at Tal-Hawli in Vittoriosa, with the applicant once again being Gaffarena (through St Paul Residential Home Ltd) and the architect involved being none other than Labour MP Charles Buhagiar, who is also executive chairman of the Building Industry Consultative Chamber (BICC).

Vittoriosa mayor John Boxall has been quoted as saying that the city is in dire need of such a facility. This may be so, but it also needs open green spaces, and the residential home can easily be sited in a committed (brownfield) site, such as those proposed by members of the Vittoriosa civil society, such as the environs of the Cottonera sports club complex and Fort Salvatore.

Given that the only proper road leading into the tal-Hawli site is a dead end, extensive natural swathes of the valley would have to be sacrificed in order to create an access road to the site. The valley supports considerable tree growth. Given its location and the topography it is also subject to periodic flooding.