

EU Parliament election - 'the real Greens'!



Is it possible to save the vintage Dar ix-Xemx in Nadur from the clutches of developers?

Lino Farrugia, general secretary of the Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FKNK), has presented himself for election to the European Parliament as a neutral and independent candidate. What defies credulity is that, when asked, he explicitly denied that he was representing conflicting interests since "the environment and tourism supplemented each other" and that "hunters and trappers were the prime promoters of the natural environment".

One wonders whether Mr Farrugia has ever gone through the plethora of letters from tourists complaining against hunting excesses in this country or has ever visited the vast swathes of pristine garigue scarred by hunters' hides and trapping nets - I have in fact included a couple of such photos for his perusal. Mr Farrugia proudly boasts that there are seven million hunters in the EU - how many non-hunters are there?

But the bottom of the barrel is scraped by Mr A. Formosa from San Gwann with his letter published in The Sunday Times of April 18 under the heading "The real Greens", the gist of which was that people should vote for the hunters' MEP rather than for AD since the former would ensure the planting of more trees!

Such a greenwashing of the entire hunting movement must certainly be one of the most accomplished Houdini acts in our islands! Hunters certainly do not plant trees for public enjoyment - I have more than once witnessed the gruff warding off of people from forested sites such as Il-Mizieb and L-Ahrax.

The hunters' metamorphosis also put them wise to the fact that indigenous trees should be planted, after years of filling every nook and cranny of prime sites with alien trees such as eucalyptus and acacia, a practice still common in some areas, such as at Ras il-Pellegrin (Gnejna), Mtahleb/Bahrija cliffs and Gozo.

I refer Mr Farrugia and Mr Formosa to the three letters published in The Sunday Times of April 11 against hunting excesses by the trigger-happy hunters in this country, which is not "a matter of opinion" as Mr Farrugia puts it. Are they aware of the hunting which took place over the previous weekend in the Addolorata Cemetery environs, which should be strictly taboo to all such acts of desecration? Hunters' hopes of getting official investiture for their despicable acts should be quashed at the June 12 election by voters who should realise who the 'real Greens' are!

Bedraggled garigue

"I will make a way in the wilderness" (Isaiah 43, 19). The current trend in this country is to take this statement literally by etching makeshift roads in pristine swathes of garigue, either for offroading, hunting or other 'recreational purposes'.

Despite incessant campaigns, the mistaken notion that garigue is tantamount to wasteland (moghxa) still persists. Many choose to colonise swathes of garigue for their own personal use, such as the opening of a remote-controlled car track on garigue in the Wied Rini area of Bahrija, complete with tyre barriers and a brazen 'RTO' sign on site.

ALE police were alerted to the site by MEPA when no permits pertinent to the site were traced - the perpetrators must still be identified. One only hopes that some action to restore the site to a semblance of its original state is taken.

With just under a tenth of our surface area being garigue, to date no garigue park has yet been declared by our authorities, despite numerous clamourings from NGOs such as Nature Trust and from individuals. NT has in fact made a line in the sand about the matter and, in collaboration with the Pembroke council, has formally applied for UNESCO help to preserve, in

tangible ways (not just through redundant scheduling) the ecologically important Pembroke garigue in what would effectively be Malta's first ever garigue park.

With no sites earmarked for offroading, all such incidents are illegal - can the ALE curb the degradation of garigue currently taking place behind the Golden Sands Hotel up the Ghajn Znuber tower? The place is literally chock-full of 4WD vehicles whose passage is exacerbating soil erosion besides smothering garigue vegetation.

New schools and land-use

The media gave a rather one-sided view of the impasse relating to the permit for a new school by the St Michael's Foundation at Tal-Balal in San Gwann, mainly highlighting the impassioned calls by parents for the school to be opened.

For once, MEPA's Planning Directorate stuck to its guns in refuting a development on ecological grounds since the area harbours a unique maquis assemblage whose species would be partly destroyed by the development. The directorate also stressed that there was the need for urgent legislation to give the area national scientific and ecological importance.

With the area earmarked for the new school at San Gwann covering 24,000 sq. metres, with a new school being constructed at Il-Karwija, l/o Kirkop and another one in the offing at Ta' Zokrija in Mosta, school projects have a gargantuan impact on land use.

The development of this new school over ecologically important maquis (habitat type of which covers just four per cent of the islands) does not compliment the Eco-school initiative in our country or the pro-active stance taken by San Gwann residents in protecting yet another part of San Gwann at Wied Ghomor.

Is it too much to expect another parliamentary resolution similar to that in 1997 whereby the land at Tal-Balal earmarked for the school is bartered for another ecologically-unimportant stretch somewhere else? If the school project does go ahead, will biology and environmental studies teachers find it fitting to include the mentioning of maquis in their annual curriculum, one wonders?

Some quintessential enforcement...at long last!

MEPA finally started biting the bullet at Xemxija by demolishing 18 concrete platforms built illegally on the foreshore at Shipwreck Promenade by owners of what have been loosely defined as 'boathouses'.

The malaise of garages garbed as boathouses is a common feature of our coastal areas, such as at Dwejra, St Thomas Bay, Bahar ic-Caghaq, L-Ahrax, Gnejna, Dahlet Qorrot, etc. Will action also be taken against such garages at Xemxija?

Dar ix-Xemx revisited

The controversy surrounding one of the oldest constructions in Nadur - i.e. Dar ix-Xemx (but craftily described as 'building in ruins') - has not abated. A new site visit has been scheduled for May 21, while 'new plans' pertinent to the structure still contemplate its demolition.

This case also highlights the need to update planning data in MEPA's Website more frequently, since the target and validation date are still the former ones while the audit trail for the case has been erased.

Silver linings

With EU accession, the components of the country's multi-hued fabric have finally switched up a gear with a myriad of green initiatives being taken:

▫ a conference on 'energy-saving houses' organised by the BICC in which it was announced that draft legislation would be presented incorporating such measures as double/triple-glazed large windows, proper insulation, adequately-sized wells, etc. Under the proposed Registration of Building Industry Contractors and Building Industry Control Act, architects would see to it that the law's provisions are incorporated in the design of the house.

▫ the BICC also made some laudable proposals regarding the revision of lack-lustre rent laws (dating back to the 1930s) and for more villas to be built on a single plot of land, among others. The only potential flaw was the proposed facilitation of the restoration of old houses which, although serving as a potential avenue for new plots, should be conducted with velvet gloves to prevent loss of vintage architectural features, etc.

▫ Consolidated Biscuits will be conducting a clean-up at Il-Magħluq reserve in Marsaxlokk, besides mending the fence, on May 28.

▫ a concerted drive by the Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment to introduce organic products on a wider scale, similar to the 10 per cent share they currently enjoy in the EU

▫ an initiative by IMAX operators whereby the admission price for films with an environmental theme was reduced on Earth Day (April 22).

Useful numbers/contacts

ALE police (for illegal bird shooting incidents, dumping, transport of topsoil, etc): tel. 2124-0707.

Supplier of biodegradable plastic: Longbow Ltd. Contact: Fabian Farrugia.

Sylvana De Bono, MEPA PRO.