

Even more cheeky applications



No prizes for guessing that I would start this article in the most predictable way of all... by listing down Outside Development Zone (ODZ) applications. The list published on April 16 'boasts' at least eight of them.

PA 04308/04 refers to a site off Triq il-Knisja, Marsascala, to which Nature Trust has already objected (AF/PA/22/04 dated September 16, 2004). The site in fact is endowed with countless carob trees in a pristine part of Marsascala and should hence be safeguarded as a green area in the imminent South Malta Local Plan.

The Structure Plan Review (SPR) exercise stresses that within the Temporary Provision Schemes (TPS), there is an oversupply of land, compared to current demand. Hence, MEPA should move in to ward off further speculation on such a site, which can rightly be described as a lung for Marsascala.

PA 00240/05 refers to the proposed sanctioning of a store and boundary wall in Wied Siekel in Fontana, Gozo, although the area is peppered with enforcement notices and lies within a watershed and an SAC of international importance!

PA 01275/05 refers to the proposed extension of yet another quarry - this time, Quarry No. 9A, Ix-Xaghra ta' Qaduma, l/o Mosta. The site lies cheek by jowl with the scheduled Victoria Lines, which have already been dilapidated beyond recognition in certain sections. Further quarrying activities so close to such a historical monument is certainly not the ideal way to restore them.

PA 01037/05 refers to the proposed temporary use of fields during July and August at Triq ir-Ramla, Xaghra. What the application does not state is that the site is on a clay slope - clay is highly susceptible to erosion and in fact smaller grain sizes are being detected on Ramla beach and in nearshore waters. The site has been served with two enforcement notices in the past - no permits should be granted to allow cars to park on sensitive clay slopes.

(This section was compiled with the generous input of Annalise Falzon, Nature Trust Malta).

Kalkara - rubbing salt into the wound

FIONA GALEA DEBONO'S report in The Sunday Times of May 8 inadvertently revamped old memories that many of us on the green side conveniently hide away over time. One such skeleton is the Kalkara Valley issue; the report dealt with the felling of two 400-year-old carob trees as part of a development project approved for the valley.

One can argue that this issue is no longer a bone of contention since plans for its development have long existed and that the approved development is on a smaller scale than that originally proposed. However, this cannot dispel the sense of foreboding on learning of the felling of the ancient trees.

In PQ 11592, Labour MP Carmelo Abela asked Minister George Pullicino how many trees, shrubs and plants had been planted around the islands during the past year. Despite the staggering total of 291,814 herbaceous specimens planted, none of these were 400-year-old carob trees - hence, planting almost a third of a million plant species will certainly not compensate for the monumental loss at Kalkara.

Being over-considerate

MR Youngman (The Sunday Times, May 8) accuses me of being over-considerate when reporting on certain planning cases in this column (Environmental concerns in Gozo, since I stated that MEPA officials could not visit the San Dimitri site due to the hunting season.

While I agree that MEPA enforcement officers could do better and still visit the site rather than being scared by hunters (even with the aid of ALE police help), I deny I was 'over-considerate'.

I just carried, verbatim, MEPA's official reply to my query about San Dimitri.

I take pains, along with the rest of Nature Trust, to scour planning applications week in and out and to alert MEPA to illegal building, etc. I think I speak out quite strongly against MEPA and other authorities when I feel they deserve it, often highlighting cases that many other correspondents simply shy away from. Omertà is still rampant in these islands, especially in Gozo, and I think I am contributing towards defusing it. Hence, the term 'over-considerate' is inappropriate in the circumstances.

Legal trapping

Daniel Xriha from St Paul's Bay (The Times, May 9) launches into a vitriolic attack on Nature Trust (Malta) for reporting widespread illegal trapping.

Could Mr Xriha list any environmental benefits of trapping? Does he contest the fact that trappers literally 'scrape' off the underlying vegetation to spread out their trapping hides, leaving behind a scarred landscaped?

The photograph by Nature Trust in the contested April 7 article may not have been a judicious one but this does not minimise in any way the damage wrought by trapping to our natural landscapes. Especially galling is Mr Xriha's final comments: "Instead of wasting precious time and pointing their fingers at trappers, especially those having full permits, Nature Trust should focus on much more important issues that are the main cause of damage to the Maltese flora and habitats".

Which exactly are these 'much more important' issues? Illegal dumping? Illegal building? Hunting? Offroading? Just mention it... Nature Trust has addressed all these issues. Mr Xriha tries to mislead readers by selectively referring to one photograph while ignoring others - this same column has published a photo of a 'makeshift' trapping hide, used by a trapper in Pembroke, to be conveniently dismantled in case of police visits.

This is not to mention the continued spiralling in trapping licences in 2003, despite Malta's commitment to the EU as from December 2002 that it would clamp down.

Beach concessions and more beaches

The Prime Minister has been quoted as stating that government aims to augment the number of Malta's sandy beaches by one every year to follow the St George's Bay example. Admittedly our sandy beaches are few, with just 2.4% of the coastline being sandy, compared with a global 66%, but one hopes that any beach accretion/reclamation scheme is backed by sound scientific data. Although St George's Bay is a feather in the government's cap (since it has been largely successful), we have had some failures too, such as the first attempts carried out at Pretty Bay, Birzebbuga.

Many have taken umbrage at the announced measure of cordoning off parts of public beaches, such as at St George's Bay and Ghadira, for private use in return for their 'management'. Although this is the norm in many European countries due to Blue Flag commitments and although it is aimed at regularising beach concessions, public access should certainly not be limited to particular parts of the beach. One has only to travel to Comino and try to sunbathe on the rocky outcrop just below the hotel to get the feeling - you are immediately told off since the beach is actually a private one.

So, are we to start expecting RTOs on beaches too? Do we need such 'beach-ownership' schemes to get our act together and clean up our beaches? Can't the hordes of public employees do the job?

By the way, I think you've heard of George Clooney's latest foray... having bought a sandy patch along the banks of one of Italy's most picturesque lakes, he tried to quell public protest by promising to clean up the remaining sandy patches.

Ta' Ċenç still not on the list

Although MEPA assured us last February that Ta' Ċenç would be submitted as a candidate for the EU's Natura 2000 sites, albeit many months after other sites and following sustained public pressure, the ecologically important site has still not been proposed by the Maltese government, as confirmed in a letter by Stavros Dimas, the EU's Environment Commissioner, to AD's Gozo spokesman, Victor Galea. What is the Maltese government waiting for... for someone to submit plans for the massive development of the area?

It's high time the public drew a line in the sand here and took it upon itself to solicit the EU to take action. Those wishing to do so should contact AD's Gozo section to obtain a copy of the sample letter being sent to Mr Dimas.

Offroading (continued)

Further on the offroading issue, may I refer readers to the Motor Vehicles (Offroading) Regulations of 1997 which clearly state:

"No person may drive a motor vehicle in, participate in, or organise any offroading or offroading event other than in a locality which is marked as an offroading site by means of signs approved under the Traffic Signs and Carriageway Marking Regulations, 1969"... such approved offroading sites include Ta' Qali and Hal Far - hence, the Selmun area should certainly be cordoned off.

Tourism... still missing the point

The blinkered outlook adopted by some of our tourism authorities found further confirmation in Opinjonisti on Net TV (April 26), in which the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association claimed that there were three major factors which could scare off tourists - dumping, road construction and building sites.

While I agree with the list, I feel that other, much more pressing problems, should have been included - the lack of free spaces (i.e. over-development, especially abutting on tourist attractions, such as the Victoria Lines) and uncontrolled hunting and trapping activities.

Silver linings

Nadur initiatives - Nadur Council is certainly putting the environment high up on its agenda. The council is trying to secure funds to restore the degraded garigue at Ta' Isopu and the Wied Rihan area - the council could be a shining beacon to other local councils by holding talks with yet another stakeholder on site, the Qortin quarry operator, to fully rehabilitate the quarry.

Some salt seems to be finally trickling into the decision-taking boards, with the MEPA board stressing that the garigue should be restored to its natural state and not to farmland which is unsuitable within such a habitat.

The same local council is actively objecting to PA 02724/04, which refers to the proposed installation of telecommunications towers at the AFM Qortin barracks - such towers would further jeopardise the integrity of ecologically important garigue on site, already bearing the brunt of countless others developments.

Marsalforn application withdrawn - PA 07427/04, referring to the proposed construction of 36 flats and garages at Triq Ghar Qawqla in Marsalforn (close to the hill's clay slopes) has been withdrawn - to the incurable pessimist, this is yet another notch along the 'victories' tally.

Wied Moqbol quarry - an application to relocate hardstone quarries formerly sited at Hagar Qim (Qasam il-Kbir) to Wied Moqbol has been turn downed by MEPA.

De La Salle Sixth Formers' Young Enterprise Green project - Serendipity, a Young Enterprise project by De La Salle Sixth Form students, certainly deserves my green accolades by delegating part of the proceeds of their sales to a tree-planting fund, in conjunction with Nature Trust (Malta).

One hopes that more business entities are endowed with a community conscience. Visit www.serendipitymalta.com or e-mail info@serendipitymalta.com.

Action taken by MEPA over Salina - After being alerted to the site by Nature Trust (Malta) and Din I-Art Helwa, MEPA has halted the works at Salina (a special area of conservation, proposed Natura 2000 site and a bird sanctuary) after a part of the historic fougasse on site dating back to the Knights was damaged by the Works Division.

This is the second time in a row that the division has carried out works in scheduled areas before permits were issued by MEPA.

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No further construction debris from the Tigné Point project should be dumped in the coastal waters off St Thomas Bay. In the planning of such large-scale construction projects, sites for the dumping of such sites should be identified beforehand so as not to compromise underwater ecological resources.