

No stopping the rot!



Offroading on the scheduled clay slopes of Selmun. Why are MEPA and the ALE oblivious to such wanton damage? Deep gulleys which hasten soil erosion are evident on site. While this is illegal, it is still the order of the day, with offroad vehicles even parked on the water's edge across the salt pans. Placing large boulders on site to cut off access would do the trick - is MEPA taking up the task?

April 9 - 11 ODZ applications. Some of these, like 01115/05, raise more than the proverbial eyebrow; this application in fact is for the construction of a house with garage and pool along the edge of a ridge in an aesthetically sensitive area of Zebbug, Gozo.

Even more brazen is 07427/04 which proposes building 36 flats and garages at Triq Ghar Qawqla in Marsalforn. Yes, that's right - 36 - as if Gozo was not already scarred by too many flats! The same site is ODZ and abuts on the clay slopes.

Meanwhile, 00575/05 refers to a site in Buskett (Ta' Kardarun) for the proposed sanctioning of a farmhouse and farm buildings in what is supposedly a Special Area of Conservation and a Natura 2000 site! This can certainly be branded as a hall of horrors!

01332/05 is about the demolition of an existing building for the construction of even more apartments, garages and the ubiquitous swimming pool at Ta' Sdieri, Gharb.

One especially galling ODZ application published on April 9 refers to a site in San Martin Valley, l/o Mgarr. 01195/05 refers to the proposed sanctioning of the replacement of an existing room and landscaping works. This is beyond belief - this column on January 23 referred to Nature Trust (Malta) reporting to MEPA development on the same site, a stone's throw from the cave chapel dedicated to Our Lady. If ever there was an existing room on site (and MEPA needs to verify such a claim), it certainly wasn't on the scale to which it has now mushroomed.

MEPA is unwittingly abetting those intent on flouting the law - you purchase a small 'room' in a pristine site to be 'away' from it all, you alter the same room beyond recognition (namely, add more rooms, possibly a swimming pool, etc - no need to worry unduly about enforcement - they will certainly not pull the structure down!) and then you apply for a sanctioning. If you surmise that things are not going your way, your architect duly conjures something out of the hat, such as that fresh plans are to be submitted and the case is deferred ad nauseam. In the meantime, the bustling development on the same site can continue.

(This section was compiled with assistance of Annalise Falzon, Nature Trust)

Loopholes

To be politically correct, sometimes it is not just MEPA's fault. Property dealers have a finger in the pie too. An advert carried recently featured the following: "Unconverted farmhouse presently having three rooms and surrounded by six tumoli of land situated on high grounds with amazing sea and country views. The land is surrounded by newly built boundary wall and present owners have permits in hand for expansion. An ideal weekend retreat".

Having permits in hand for expansion' refers to the fact that registered farmers can be granted up to a total of 150 m² of floor space in ODZ sites. However, this is a two-edged sword, since farmers can sell, with permits in hand, their ODZ property to any non-farmer. End result... a non-farmer who is certainly not bent on tilling the land, is cosseted in a plush villa with pool in what was a pristine ODZ site.

What amazes me is why the competent authorities never seem to be conscious of such possible loopholes in the system. A possible answer could be that with the kind of money involved in such transactions (this property was selling for Lm150,000-175,000) there is ample room for such loopholes!

Media blackout

With all this development mayhem going on, one would expect our vociferous broadcasting authorities to make hay while the sun shines and dedicate hours of airtime to the scandalous state of affairs... yet there is only total silence, with no TV programme opting to put the environment (not just waste management) high up on its list of priorities.

It seems that courting games, the Eurovision and other frivolities sell more these days - what a way to sedate the public! And then we brag "Gurnalizmu fuq kolloxi!"

Fontana ODZ application

MEPA'S DCC Division A board is responsible for deliberating on applications pertaining to ODZ (outside development zone) sites. One such application has been submitted by an architect who happens to be the board's chairman.

PA 07617/03 in fact refers to an ODZ site in Fontana, which abuts on Wied il-Lunzjata. An application for the same site was submitted last November but now fresh plans have been submitted in which the whole footprint has been downsized, but it still entails encroaching onto part of the belvedere.

This site is also adjacent to a declared Special Area of Conservation and is prominently located, overlooking a valley which has been scheduled for its ecological importance and high landscape value.

Fontana residents have lodged two written objections with MEPA, dated October 20 and April 14.

A local NGO has objected several times too.

The stereotyped reply from MEPA has been that public employees, including MEPA ones, are governed by a code of ethics, and that anyone with a possible conflict of interest is bound to leave the room during the decision-taking.

Why bother?

Try parking your car on a double yellow line and you will be duly fined by our over-zealous wardens. Yet try your hand at illegal offroading on the scheduled clay slopes at Selmun/Ghajn Hadid, hastening soil erosion in the process, and no authority to penalise you for your deeds is to be seen within a mile's radius! Welcome to the deeply paradoxical Maltese reality!

Our authorities have a predilection to publish volumes of legislation and to invest a lot of pomp in advertising it - the same volumes are however shelved time and again, with no enforcement. Simply planting two huge boulders on the access road leading down to the clay slopes will do the trick but our authorities seem to be hard of hearing. Do MEPA or the ALE (Administrative Law Enforcement unit of the police) assume that visitors to the site are to continuously call them to report cases of offroading when this is simply the order of the day?

MEPA and the ALE should publicly state if any pressure is being put upon them to close one eye since offroading clubs have a notorious political clout. I cannot see any other reason why such a blatant environmental degradation is being allowed in broad daylight!

Do law-abiding citizens have to embark on a civil disobedience campaign to prod MEPA and the ALE into action since the law is being so blatantly flouted at Selmun? When confronted on site, offroad-vehicle owners simply shrug their shoulders when told they are causing soil erosion, while we painstakingly explain to our students what soil erosion entails, etc. And this when MEPA was (or still is) actively involved in workshops on desertification! I wonder if during such workshops participants were granted a sample of MEPA's endeavours to fight desertification in the islands by visiting the Selmun site!

Will we ever see Selmun cordoned off to offroaders? Wishful thinking?

MEPA certainly not coping!

Following my claim that MEPA is not coping with complaints, reports, etc. I wish to add that it has been two full months since I recorded eight cases of possible infringements with MEPA via e-mail - to date, only four of these has been answered (Gudja, Bidnija, Mizieb and Ta' Mrejnu queries still unanswered)!

That makes 50 per cent efficiency, hardly an enviable statistic! With our public finances at a low ebb, enrolling new manpower at MEPA is certainly not on the cards for now... hence, there appears to be no way out of the current cul-de-sac.

Quarries, quarries everywhere

With over 80 active quarries to date in our islands, our thirst for yet more building stone is far from abating. In fact, applications for quarry extensions are the order of the day. At the time of writing, the decision on the relocation of the 'Hagar Qim' quarries to Wied Moqbol, l/o Zurrieq (PA 2700/00), has not yet been taken. Such an application entails a déjàvu scenario - the uprooting of yet more carob trees.

Still another quarry extension application hails from Nadur (PA 3309/93), more specifically from the ecologically important Qortin area, and this time to sanction an extension since the quarry operators extended the quarry on their own steam.

00655/05 (published on March 26) refers to the proposed renewing of a licence for hardstone quarry no. 10, located at Ghar id-Dud, limits of Qala. When pondering over whether to renew such a licence, MEPA should consider that the same quarry is barring public access to the coastline and in some instances the same coastline has been breached. In fact, a walking contour girdling the entire Gozitan coastline is not possible due to the presence of such a quarry.

Welcome to Malta, the eternal building site!

Update

With reference to the story carried in the last GWB article re the cordoning off of land opposite Triq l-Imsaqqfin in Santa Margerita Estate, Mosta, the Mosta council duly replied to my request for information by stating that during its meeting on February 21, it was confirmed that the land in question is privately-owned as it was transferred to its original owners from Government and that the precincts of the site do not include archaeological remains such as tombs and dolmens which are of the public domain.

Silver linings

Country Castle decision - the DCC Division A does manage to hit on the right ploy sometimes, as it did when refuting PA 04092/04 which referred to the sanctioning of illegalities in the Country Castle saga. This comes hot on the heels of a similar decision in which the application for the construction of workshops in another part of the valley was also rebuffed. One augurs that the Appeals Board does not undo such sterling work at the end of the day.

MEPA's enforcement showed some clout at last when the PEO (Principal Enforcement Officer) successfully solicited the owner of fields in Gudja to start clearing a budding dump after MEPA was alerted to the site by Nature Trust (Malta).

MEPA recently announced the institution of the Environment Planning Awards, in recognition of those companies and individuals who implement innovative development proposals which respect the environment. The award ceremony will be part of the authority's activities for World Environment Day. The awards will be divided into three categories: Special Award for Engineering Solutions and Urban Design; Award for Conservation; and Award for Environmental Enhancement.

Quote of the week

MEPA defending its Director of Planning - "This (the Development Planning Act) states the leadership role and function which the Director of Planning is to assume in office... This role is required to give direction, manage and control the Planning Directorate and to ensure that the staff carry out their tasks effectively and efficiently" (MaltaToday, April 24) - with reference to the Director of Planning, Christopher Borg, writing to three case officers to prepare favourable recommendations for a car park and commercial development at Chalet, Sliema. If this isn't 'controlling' the Planning Directorate? Poor, hapless case officers!