

The turn of the tide?



A good site for the new petrol station at Mġarr.

The recommendation issued by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority's Environmental Protection Directorate (EPD) regarding the Qala Creek project at Hondoq ir-Rummien marks a red letter day indeed.

I paraphrase from the report compiled by myself that was commissioned by Qala council on the impact the project would have on the area's marine environment:

"The earmarking of Hondoq ir-Rummien as a potential marina-harboursing site sets a precedent, locally, on two counts. Firstly, existing yacht marinas are all sited in coastal areas where bathing water quality is inferior. The quality of bathing water at Hondoq is top-notch, as confirmed in successive years in bathing water quality monitoring reports.

"Secondly, with the exception of Mġarr harbour, the Gozo channel is shorn of any large-scale anthropogenic impact and this (along with strong currents in the area) translates in high water transparency values.

"Thirdly, ever since the publication of the Yachting Development Study (Deloitte and Touche, 1996), three private marinas were developed – Portomaso, Manoel Island and Grand Harbour, at sites whose bathing amenity is considerably less than the Hondoq ir-Rummien site, partly because of the inferior bathing water quality.

"It is not surprising therefore that the only document to positively consider Hondoq ir-Rummien for the siting of a yacht marina since then is the document commissioned by the applicant, with the site not featuring in the extensive list of sites for permanent and temporary marinas recently released by the Malta Maritime Authority on April 28, 2009."

One augurs that the Mepa board does not spring a surprise at the 11th hour and that the Qala community and environmentalists are not bogged down in yet another saga with the submission of a second, watered-down proposal by the applicant should the first one be rejected.

The current dilapidated state of the defunct quarry on site will continue to be used as leverage by those proposing some form of development at Hondoq ir-Rummien. The only way of rectifying this eyesore without ushering in developers is for the authorities to put the eco-Gozo concept to good use and shoulder the responsibility of rehabilitating the quarry-turned-landfill, once and for all.

This viewpoint was echoed by the EPD in its recommendation for refusal, when it said the project's claimed benefits could easily be delivered without resorting to the proposed development itself, such as the removal of debris from the hollowed-out quarry site.

So why don't the Gozo Ministry and the Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs take the bull by the horns and start rehabilitating the quarry site, thus effectively pulling the carpet from beneath the developers' feet and depriving them of any play for future applications on site?

One does not expect environmental considerations to trump economic ones in every single decision taken by Mepa but there must be a presumption against further large-scale residential and touristic development on the islands, especially in coastal areas.

Impacts of road construction

Yet again this year, extensive stretches of our road network (e.g. Marfa Road in Mellieħa, Garibaldi and Council of Europe roads in Luqa, and Xatt ir-Risq in Marsa) have qualified for upgrading through the EU's Trans-European Transport Network (Ten-T) funds, to the tune of just over €30 million financing by the EU.

The Ten-T is the EU's transport infrastructure framework. Initially adopted in 1990, it encompasses 30 'priority projects' throughout Europe. By 2020, it is envisaged that the Ten-T will include 89,500 km of roads, 94,000 km of railways, 11,250 km of inland waterways, 210 inland ports, 294 seaports and 366 airports.

Taken at face value, this local news item that we have acceded more EU funds is positive. However, when one visits these sites and looks at the utter disregard shown by the entrusted contractors for roadside tree species and habitats such as garigue, the feeling soon veers from elation to disillusionment.

Despite Transport Malta's assurances that trees lost would be replaced and that environmental considerations are being taken on board, one wonders when passing through the Marfa Road 'construction' site and sees the roadside mounds of branches from chopped-down trees and the heaps of rubble and dust smothering the nearby garigue areas and olive trees. Do we have to sacrifice yet more hectares of garigue?

Any statement of reassurance falls flat when one is aware of the environmental credentials of the contractor entrusted with the Marfa Road project and sees his name emblazoned on the on-site container. Any confidence peters out when one sees the wasteful use of water to maintain the species planted for landscaping purposes which are scant solace for the loss of established tree cover.

The crowning moment, however, comes when one sees heavy machinery parked with non-chalance on pristine garigue at Marfa and the sheer devastation wrought by such recklessness. Any environmental monitors on site are conspicuous by their absence.

Projects related to the Ten-T project have been implicated in some major environmental scars across Europe. For instance, I quote verbatim from Birdlife International's report on the environmental impacts of this transport network:

"The Priority project for the Danube waterway has been planned without proper environmental impact assessment or compliance with existing legislation and could impact 14 Special Protection Areas and 79 Sites of Community Interest (both are types of protected natural areas) across Austria, Germany, Belgium, Hungary, Netherlands and Slovakia, plus 62 Important Bird Areas (potential Natura 2000 sites) in Bulgaria and Romania.

"The Priority projects are, however, only the tip of the 'Ten-T iceberg'. Implementation of the whole Ten-T network could have even more severe impacts, both on individual sites and on the coherence of the Natura 2000 network."

Quid pro quo at Mġarr

The Latin expression 'quid pro quo' indicates a more-or-less equal exchange or substitution of goods or services, the proverbial 'favour for a favour' or 'tit for tat'.

The recommendation for approval of the petrol station at Mġarr (PA 0667/08) is reminiscent of this concept, but with negative connotations.

For instance, an outline permit was issued in 1998 for the reconstruction of the petrol station within the Mġarr village square and of a vehicle servicing garage of an open vehicle storage area just south of the petrol station site.

The recommendation for ap-proval of the relocation of these facilities to an alternative Outside Development Zone site just before one reaches Żebbiegħ is being trumpeted as a sort of planning gain by Mepa and by those wishing to see the end of the petrol station in the Mġarr village square.

However, this relocation will result in a quid pro quo, with the environmental impacts currently being experienced within the Mġarr core area simply being transplanted to a new ODZ area on the periphery of the village.

The new site earmarked for the petrol station relocation on the approach to Żebbiegħ

(i) Lies a mere 250m from a water catchment area and reservoir leading to the Għajn Riħana watercourse system – this fact, coupled with the fact that the proposed petrol station site lies on a slope leading to the water catchment area raises eyebrows about the validity of the following statement in the case officer's report: 'The Environmental Planning Statement was also accompanied by a site selection exercise which determined that the proposed site is the most suited when assessed against a number of criteria';

(ii) Will entail an increase in almost 1,000m² in floor space as compared to the former site, although the applicant and his architect strenuously tried to justify the need for the increase in

footprint on safety grounds, among others;

(iii) The new site will include facilities so far absent from the village square one, such as a car wash and jet wash;

(iv) A brand new petrol station has only recently been opened about two kilometres away, at Ta' Buqana, close to Chadwick Lakes.

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