

Which beach is next for the bulldozer treatment?



Why all the fuss about the alka at San Blas Bay when the same beach is surrounded by illegal structures, such as this kiosk?

After the brouhaha that followed the heavy-handed works at Ramla l-Hamra, where a bulldozer was called in to excavate a substantial part of the beach to bury large stones and rocks, one would have expected the Gozo Ministry to tread more carefully with regard to other Gozitan beaches. But barely two months have passed and it seems the ministry has learned no lessons from the debacle at Ramla l-Hamra.

On the feast of Santa Marija, August 15, a mechanical shovel was called in to, according to the most recent press release by the Gozo Ministry, clear San Blas Bay from 'alka' (in fact, it was beached seagrass, rather than algae, as the ministry claimed).

The pathetic press release is full of contradictions which undermine the main justification used to condone the works at Ramla l-Hamra – namely that the rocks that had to be removed were too heavy, and thus mechanical assistance had to be called in.

This justification certainly does not hold water at San Blas, where the alka on the beach could easily have been scooped up manually by a number of Gozo Ministry workers using hand-held shovels, in order to avoid scooping up sand and stones with the alka.

Using the latter method would also have avoided the bulldozer compacting the sand it was treading upon and possibly creating gullies that will exacerbate erosion of the beach after heavy rainfall.

After all, San Blas Bay is a scheduled site (Level 2, within the Qortin ta' Isopu and Qortin tal-Maġun Area of Ecological Importance/Site of Scientific Importance) and lies within the Northeast Marine Protected Area, which is a proposed Natura 2000 site.

The same pathetic press release tries to reassure the public that the Gozo Ministry is now in discussions with the Malta Environment and Planning Authority on the monitoring of any further works on site.

But the very pertinent question that begs an answer is: Why didn't the Gozo Ministry liaise with Mepa from the very beginning, before the start of works, rather than proceeding willy-nilly, and consulting Mepa only as an afterthought, presenting it with a fait accompli after its actions provoked a public backlash?"

Why didn't the Gozo Ministry liaise with Mepa from the very beginning, before the start of works, rather than proceeding willy-nilly, and consulting Mepa only as an afterthought, presenting it with a fait accompli after its actions provoked a public backlash?

Upon visiting San Blas one finds at least four pending enforcement notices on site for the construction of an illegal kiosk, rooms and an enclosure with reeds where bricks are stored. Mepa and the Gozo Ministry's priorities seem to be awry – why get so worked up over some 'alka' and yet overlook these glaring illegalities on the same beach?

Gaia, the NGO that manages Ramla l-Hamra, and which, strangely, has vigorously defended the bulldozer approach to such a beach, must be rueing the fact that, as in the Gozo Ministry's press release, they are being used as a pawn to defend the ministry against the media and public condemnation of the works at Ramla l-Hamra, or used to simply rubber-stamp their validity.

I suspect this won't be the last time the Gozo Ministry bandies this NGO about in an attempt to whitewash its heavy-handed tactics.

With respect to the works at Ramla l-Hamra, I reiterate for the umpteenth time the questions I have put previously:

When the Gozo Ministry asserts that the works at Ramla l-Hamra were covered by Mepa permits, does this mean that the works complied with the list of permit conditions drafted by the Environmental Protection Directorate (EPD) staff at Mepa, or was the list conveniently watered down by the Mepa chairman's office?

Can the Gozo Ministry or Mepa publish the ecological monitoring study conducted by the authority or Gaia for the works and which presumably led them to conclude that no damage was done on site?

Can Gaia publish the names and academic qualifications of its members or of the experts commissioned to conduct the study?

Asserting that works receive the seal of approval by an NGO is not enough – one has to check whether that NGO is indeed competent to monitor and assess human activities in a Natura 2000 site.

It might be my over-speculative imagination but it seems that works on beaches are always pencilled in for the early hours of public holidays (those at Ramla l-Hamra were conducted on June 7 – Sette Giugno). Is this a coincidence or just a ruse to minimise the presence of third parties on site?

Rather than resorting to crisis-management tactics in the middle of summer, the Gozo Ministry should, say by January, have its technical staff draft detailed method statements for works it intends to conduct on beaches in Gozo throughout summer (such as the removal of rocks, alka, and so forth) and have them scrutinised by Mepa's EPD staff (who are up to the task, unlike others), so that there is ample latitude for any eventual permits (with a comprehensive list of permit conditions) to be issued in time for the following summer.

This is the logical procedure that should be followed in a European nation which fully upholds its environmental legislation and processes.

Such policy blunders are the result of the lack of MPs having a modicum of scientific background. In the UK, the scientific community has long been advocating the need for more 'scientist' MPs. My hunch is that such a debate will never materialise locally, with only the most charismatic individuals who are most apt at clientilism getting elected.

So it is only legitimate to ask: Which beach in Gozo is next for the bulldozer treatment? Fñodqo ir-Rummien? Mgarr ix-Xini?

A project to make 'the cloud' greener

As the world becomes increasingly dependent on online services, the demand for new data centres is booming, and so is their energy consumption.

Data centres worldwide, many of them providing cloud storage and related services, produce around half the volume of emissions of the global aviation industry and more than the total emissions of the Netherlands.

Researchers taking part in the Seventh Framework programme-funded project Games (Green Active Management of Energy in IT Service centres) are investigating ways to reduce the environmental impact of such data centres, which are increasing globally at the annual rate of 20 per cent.

For details on the project, visit www.green-datacenters.eu.

www.alandaidun.eu