

## Anti-Hondoq front evaporates



While the proposals for Hondoq ir-Rummien had attracted so much opposition, the response so far to those for Tas-Simar, barely a kilometre away, have, strangely, been much more subdued.

The premature unveiling of proposals by the Milan office of Chapman Taylor for the redevelopment of the unsightly quarry at Tas-Simar along the south-eastern coast of Gozo opened a veritable can of worms and has concurrently revealed the fickleness of some past environmental campaigns.

It is significant that the Tas-Simar site lies a mere 1.5 kilometres away from Hondoq ir-Rummien and lies in the same locality of Qala, so one would expect that the same issues which rightly raised the bristles of Qala local council and members of the environmentalist community would also apply to the Tas-Simar site. In fact, the uncanny similarity between the two sites does not stop with their close proximity. It also includes shared features such as a quarried site and a proposed yacht marina and luxury apartments/villas and a hotel. The Tas-Simar site also includes a cruise liner harbour to boot.

In order to develop Tas-Simar trucks would have to ferry away millions of tons of construction waste and presumably weave their way through the 'narrow' Qala streets, as would have been the case with the Hondoq development. Back in 2010, Qala local council had rightly raised a hullabaloo about the traffic impact assessment conducted as part of the wider Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) for the proposed Hondoq development, and had insisted that this had to be redone before the public consultation could be held.

A soundbite from a prominent anti-Hondoq spokesperson, released just before the 2010 public hearing on the development is especially telling: "We already have problems with the huge flow of traffic. Qala already has traffic problems caused by the heavy trucks passing through the village on their way to and from the quarries, even though a bypass was specifically intended to serve that purpose. The creation of a holiday village at Hondoq will mean that, in addition to the quarry traffic, this village of narrow streets would have to cope with hundreds of extra vehicle trips daily, by tourists and hotel suppliers."

Size does matter, and while the development at Hondoq ir-Rummien was expected to encompass a total area of 68 hectares (68,000 square metres), the one at Tas-Simar is considerably larger, extending over a whopping 220,000 square metres. Against this backdrop, the traffic impact concerns, flagged so effectively during the Hondoq saga, hold even more water for the Tas-Simar proposal, assuming that new roads will not be carved out of the countryside to bypass Qala altogether.



By all means, rehabilitate the quarried site at Tas-Simar and make the operator pay for it, but not at the expense of creating another fracas in the sea.

The public knee-jerk reaction to the proposed cruise terminal at Tas-Simar was generally a positive one, since the perceived restoration of an eyesore and its redevelopment in a project to kickstart the perpetually ailing Gozitan economy wins brownie points with many individuals. Few of these realise the repercussions on the marine environment of such a development, which will entail land reclamation on a massive scale. The proposed gargantuan breakwater arm needs to come to terms with the unremitting northeast winds to which the site is so blatantly exposed.

Any fine sediment that is not contained by mitigation measures, such as silt curtains (Malta does not exactly have a good track record when it comes to enforcing the use of such measures – vide the Ta' Xbiex stormwater discharge point), will inevitably spill over into the Malta-Gozo Channel, where currents will carry the murky water and any other unsavoury residue out to sea and along the coast, including to Hondoq ir-Rummien.

Yacht marinas also constantly discharge residues of all types into the sea, with such a cocktail including anti-fouling paints and hydrocarbon/fuel residues. So all those getting hot under the collar in 2010 in view of the perceived impact on the bathing quality of their beloved Hondoq should equally be concerned about the Tas-Simar proposal.

*Qala local council should explain the stark contrast between its militant stance against the Hondoq development and its absolute silence concerning the Tas-Simar proposal*

The presumed need for Gozo to have its own cruise terminal and additional berthing facilities for yachts has been bandied around many a time. But why tart up the project with the usual frills, namely luxury apartments/villas and a hotel? Why does every development on these islands have to carry an element of real estate?

With the exception of Marsalforn, the entire northern and eastern flanks of Gozo have been largely spared the ravages of coastal ribbon development that have blighted so many other areas of the archipelago. Barring Hondoq, the closest inlet to Tas-Simar is Daħlet Qorrot, which is cherished for its tranquility.

Moreover such a massive development will cause considerable light pollution in an otherwise darkened stretch of coastline.

It has been pointed out from the outset that Tas-Simar lies within the North-East marine protected area (MPA), designated by virtue of the extensive *Posidonia oceanica* (Neptune grass) seagrass meadows that grow in the waters of this MPA. Developing a cruise liner terminal and a yacht marina – two coastal developments that have among the most serious impact on the marine environment – at Tas-Simar is tantamount to developing a residential area within a forest.

Detractors of the marine conservation argument rebut by saying that Gozitans need jobs, not alka, as the Neptune grass is known in Maltese. Well, you could hardly have a more short-sighted argument than this. Gozo's waters are pulling the crowds for their bathing quality and their submerged assets which are ideal for scuba diving.

Healthy seagrass meadows are part of the reason for the attractiveness of these waters. Wherever such meadows have been obliterated, such as at Portomaso marina and in Marsaxlokk Bay, the diversity of marine life, underwater appeal and water quality in general has suffered. For instance, seagrass meadows tend to trap suspended particulates on their leaves.

By all means, rehabilitate the quarry at Tas-Simar, but not at the expense of creating another environmental fracas in the sea and privatising yet another stretch of coastline. After decades of excavating the site, extending the quarry beyond its permitted boundaries and rendering the whole coastal site a dustbowl, the operator should be made to contribute towards the site's restoration. If telephony companies and operators in other sectors whose environmental impact is not so obvious feel obliged to contribute towards society through their corporate responsibility funds, God only knows what that of quarry operators should be!

Qala local council should explain the stark contrast between its militant stance against the Hondoq development and its absolute silence concerning the Tas-Simar proposal, since its current muzzled behaviour is raising more than an eyebrow, and might lead to justified accusations of nimbyism. Consistency is obviously the name of the game in such circumstances.

## **Certainly not a feast for sea urchins**

The Festa Rizzi (sea urchin festival) organised by Ta' Xbiex local council is a classic example of how thin on the ground environmental management is in this country. The festival promoted the consumption of the edible sea urchin – a species that is listed in local and regional environmental legislation as a species whose 'exploitation requires/needs regulation'.

Not only does our country not have a licensing system in place for this species, which would usher in a quota system, as is done in places like Sicily and southern Italy, but a permit is not even necessary to hold such an event in Malta. So how can anyone monitor the actual number of sea urchins consumed during such an event, or where and how they were caught?

Large-scale exploitation of this species through the use of boats and scuba gear is an ever-increasing phenomenon in local waters, especially in places like Sliema and Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq. Not taking any action to prevent this ongoing pillage of the edible sea urchin is certainly not the way to regulate the exploitation of the species.

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