

## Give beaches a break in summer



Heavy machinery should never be allowed on a sensitive Natura 2000 beach. Beached litter should be removed the good old-fashioned way... i.e. manually. Photo: Astrid Vella

With each bathing season we get the usual agonising reports of heavy machinery being used on beaches, mainly to clear deposits of dead *Posidonia oceanica* (a seagrass, not a seaweed) litter or to bury mounds of pebbles lest they interfere with bathers' stroll into the sea.

This year was no exception, with bathers at Ghajn Tuffieħa getting a rude awakening when they were confronted with heavy machinery that had been called in to 'groom' the beach from dead seagrass litter.

It is utterly incredible how such outdated practices still persist, in a Natura 2000 site to boot, despite the many times it has been clearly explained that such heavy-handed tactics wreak ecological damage to the beach ecosystem, besides making the sand structure more prone to erosion.

Following the latest such episode, the authorities should answer the following questions:

- What permit conditions were imposed on such works by the competent authority and who was responsible to ensure that these conditions were complied with?
- Was any form of environmental monitoring conducted on site during the works? If so, by whom and could the results of this monitoring be published?

It is understandable that with the onset of the bathing season, such accumulations of beached seagrass debris (banquettes) needs to be removed from beaches for economic reasons despite the beneficial ecological role that they play.

But one has to distinguish between urban, disturbed beaches, such as St George's Bay in St Julian's and Pretty Bay in Birzebbuga, and more sensitive ones such as Ghajn Tuffieħa, which even enjoy the designation of Natura 2000 sites, and where such litter should have been removed manually rather than using heavy machinery. Smoke-belching mechanical shovels and trucks kicking up bowls of dust and driving their way down through dirt tracks etched in the clay slopes in the nature reserve are no way to manage a beach.

Ecological considerations aside, bathers were also right to be aggrieved at the safety hazard unfolding in front of them, with heavy machinery manoeuvring in a restricted space and children scampering around. This could have been avoided had the works been commissioned weeks before, so as to allow enough time for the manual removal of the beached litter using good old-fashioned shovels and recovering it by barge.

### Just greenwash? Only time will tell

The Nationalist Party's pledge that any future approvals of projects in Outside Development Zone area should be subject to a two-thirds majority vote in Parliament could be considered a game-changer.

All governments in the post-Independence era have been reluctant to relinquish control of the sensitive domain of land use as this is perceived as potentially securing their grip on power. This has culminated in the last two administrations resorting to placing the Lands Department directly under the control of the Office of the Prime Minister.

It is no surprise that this revolutionary proposal came from the ranks of the Opposition, as the party in government is currently too engaged in fire-fighting to come up with such audacity and innovation.

Cynics will rightly point out that the PN's green credentials are not exactly unsullied, to use an understatement, and that it pillaged ODZ areas relentlessly during its 25-odd years in power. They will add that the PN had ample time to introduce such measures when in power, rather than from the comfort of the Opposition benches.

The baggage of the PN and the Labour Party on this subject explains why environmental NGOs only give lukewarm receptions to proposals to save ODZ areas made by these two parties, however valid they may be. Too often, promises have been made, only to be completely reversed when the political tables and roles are reversed; hence one threads carefully when politicians make solemn declarations.

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The Prime Minister should live up to the pledge he recently made in favour of the environment by clearly stating that he is against the Santa Luċija retirement home ODZ application.

However, having made this disclaimer, one has to concede that unless it includes any major loopholes, the PN proposal is brave and should be met by cross-party consensus, in the same way as the Public Domain Act did.

We have reached tipping point when it comes to ODZ areas, such that the approval of any major ODZ project should be justified by some overriding public interest and subjected to some rigorous parliamentary scrutiny. This is especially so since the Parliamentary Committee on the Environment has lost its teeth with the resignation of MP Marlene Farrugia.



The PN is doing well in breaking through the glass ceiling with this audacious proposal, but it must be prepared to back up its pledges with actions, as otherwise such pledges would be nothing more than an albatross hanging around its neck. The environmental movement will make sure the party will be held accountable on such pledges.

Only time will tell if the PN is finally marking a break with its past when it comes to the environment. Everyone is entitled to the benefit of the doubt.

### **Litmus test for the PM**

Yet another litmus test has arisen for the Prime Minister's renewed stated commitment to safeguard the environment made in his May 1 speech.

The proposed four-storey retirement home, spread over 4,500 square metres in an ODZ area next to the girls' lyceum in Santa Luċġja, is an opportunity for the government to repair its tattered environmental credentials.

One may counter that government should stay at arm's length from decisions taken by the Planning Authority board if it is to respect its autonomy. However, one must also understand that the majority of the members on this board were directly or indirectly appointed by government, which bent the Planning Authority's arm when it came to selecting a site for the Żonqor ODZ development. So likewise, government can 'guide' the PA board to give the thumbs down to this large-scale development in Santa Luċġja.

Arguing that there is a dire need for the development because only 20 per cent of retirement homes are located in the south of the island is not good enough an argument. The ODZ site earmarked for this proposed development was probably motivated by the low price of the land since no sites within development boundaries and no committed/disturbed ODZ sites were shortlisted as alternatives.

We only see things in isolation on this island, being oblivious to the bigger picture. For instance, there are similar ODZ retirement homes planned for Tal-Ħawli in the Cottonera area and in Għaxaq, with such homes fast becoming the new El Dorado for developers, after the petrol station and agricultural store boom.

The South Malta Local Plan stipulates that "Mepa will support the protection of the open stretch of land shielding residences from the Ғal Luqa and Bir id-Deheb arterial roads".

Years ago, an application for a residential development in the same area was rejected outright and some local councils near Santa Luċġja, such as Gudja, were very active in the Save Wied Garnaw campaign, and even attended protests organised on site.

Why has this resolve dissipated this time round?

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