

## Mediocrity is... a Facebook campaign



Seagrass litter should not be equated with other types of litter and waste in beach cleaning campaigns.

Facebook and other social media networks may be very effective to help bolster your social life, to help stay constantly in touch with peers, and to 'spread the word', but the utility of such networks stops there. When their remit is stretched further, the result is mediocrity.

A case in point was a recent discussion over Facebook as to the merits of a faster connection between Malta and Gozo, with a Facebook group sprouting to drum up support for a tunnel between the two islands.

And last week we read about the 'Save the beach' campaign launched by Corona Extra to promote the cleaning of a number of local and European beaches. It all sounds very laudable and commendable until one reads that the beach or beaches to be cleaned would be shortlisted as a result of voting by the public on Facebook.

It is inconceivable how anyone can choose which beaches to clean on the basis of fickle popular demand. Such a choice should be made on technical lines and on the basis of existing scientific studies and surveys – otherwise, we really risk throwing pearls to the pigs.

For instance, sensitive beaches, and beaches of conservation importance should not be the subject of such clean-up efforts. A case in point is Ramla l-Hamra in Gozo.

Such is the ecological sensitivity of the sand dunes on this beach that the local tourism authorities failed to get the green light for mechanical cleaning of the beach, and more importantly, to get the coveted Blue Flag certification.

It seems my misgivings are well-founded, as two of the beaches short-listed for the Corona Extra cleaning (Qbajjar and Marsalforn in Gozo) showed copious quantities of beached seagrass.

By promoting the clean-up of such beaches, the campaign promoters are simply projecting the message that seagrass debris is waste to be disposed of, equating it to plastic debris, cigarette buds and similar rubbish.

As members of the local scientific community, myself included, have pointed out, such seagrass debris is important to prevent shoreline erosion; it is an ecosystem in itself and helps establish sand dune plants.

I admit that seagrass debris has to be removed from popular beaches when the bathing season approaches due to the importance of tourism to the local economy but it is misleading to denigrate such debris as if it was another form of litter.

The promoters of this campaign may be motivated by noble principles (such as that of safeguarding the coastal environment) but there is more to environmental conservation than mere enthusiasm and a sanitised beach apparently free of litter.

### Encroaching on Balluta Valley

Balluta Valley may be loosely described as an urban valley or, better still, a green lung, as it snakes through the dense urban fabric that hems it in from all sides. Similarly Wied Ghollieqa and Wied Ghomor, which span from Kappara to Swieqi.

Besides the ever encroaching construction creeping up the mouth of the Balluta Valley, including jarring apartment blocks and a hotel, the valley bed also has to bear the brunt of other impacts.

Besides being littered by construction debris, rubble, and sewage discharge pipes the valley bed also hosts an illegally-constructed concrete platform.

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority duly issued enforcement notice 00614/06 over this construction, and the case has been referred to Mepa's direct action team, but the platform still mars the valley bed.

## **A global plastic problem**

Tackling plastic debris in marine ecosystems has finally climbed up the list of priorities of the international community, probably due to the scale of the problem. For instance, it is thought that in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, which is the marine area furthest from land, there are 26 to 46 times the amount of plastic (by weight) as plankton, with plastic penetrating every layer of the marine food web in the area.

One of the major problems of plastic litter is its persistence over time due to its resistance to photo-degradation (breakdown by solar radiation).

For instance, it is estimated that a disposable diaper, a plastic bottle and a six-pack plastic ring take about 500, 450 and 400 years respectively to photo-degrade in the environment.

High-profile international meetings on the subject have been organised by the European Commission, United Nations Environment Programme and the US government, tacitly acknowledging the problem's international dimension.

As EU Environment Commissioner Janez Potocnik recently said, "the matter would need to be addressed and solved internationally", mainly because it is very difficult to attribute specific responsibility for the accumulated waste.

## **Innovative biofuel project**

The concept of producing biofuel from discarded cooking oil may not raise many eyebrows as a local company has been trying its hand at it for some years now, with some success.

However, what is innovative is the placing of special containers in residential areas, as has been done by the municipality of Lisbon in Portugal, to collect discarded domestic oil as part of an EU Life project.

Each container was armed with an inbuilt micro-computer system to assess the quantities being collected and to automatically inform authorities of the need to empty them. By June 2009, the project had collected over 11,000 kilos of discarded domestic cooking oil, resulting in two major benefits:

Firstly, there was a marked reduction in the level of oils, fats and hydrocarbons in the waste water treatment plants, resulting in savings of up to €4,000 in maintenance costs on the local sewage system. Secondly, using the biofuel developed from the cooking oil translated into significant carbon dioxide and sulphur dioxide savings.

## **European Green Capitals**

The EU Commission's European Green Capital scheme encourages cities in Europe to incorporate environmental considerations in urban planning.

In 2010, Stockholm passed on the baton to the city of Hamburg by presenting it with the official award – the Green Book (no connection with the Libyan Revolution).

Within the book, a page is dedicated to each winning city, with the manuscript being retained for a year by the respective winning city before being passed on.

Vitoria-Gasteiz, the capital of Spain's Basque country, and the French west coast city of Nantes, will hold the title of European Green Capital in 2012 and 2013 respectively.

The contest is judged on 12 criteria, including 11 environmental indicators ranging from sustainable transport and land use to bio-diversity and air quality, and a 12th indicator measuring the city's communication skills.

Some of the attributes of Nantes are truly mesmerising – for instance, several Natura 2000 sites and other nature conservation areas are located on its doorstep, with the use of pesticide to manage green public areas declining by 85 per cent.

Some 90 beekeepers are located in the city itself, with bees acting as the best indicator of air quality.