

Our infatuation with ODZ



The Eco-Gozo concept still has many hurdles to surmount to penetrate the Gozitan mindset. Picture shows construction-related machinery and material being stored a stone's throw away from what should be high-end tourist accommodation in Ghasri.

The bold statement made in the recently-launched Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development (Sped) that “it is the intention of government that the Sped shall not amend the development boundaries as approved by Parliament in 2006” is music to my ears.

This means the original pledge made in 2006, when the euphemistically-termed ‘scheme rationalisation’ was announced, that development boundaries would not be extended for a further 10 years has been renewed for at least a further four years, that is, till 2020, which marks the expiry of the remit of the Sped.

Although there was no need to justify this position, the Sped states that there is already an oversupply of land within existing development boundaries that can accommodate a projected 44,000 new residential units, when in reality, just 11,000 are needed till 2020.

One hopes that this rationale also trickles down to every Tom, Dick and Harry out there whose major aspiration in life is simply to have an Outside Development Zone plot that they own being included within development boundaries, simply because their peers managed such a feat.

I have no sympathy for the arguments brought up by such people, which range from “this is an injustice – my neighbour’s patch made it to the development boundaries but mine didn’t” to “I simply want to develop the patch for my kids”.

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority is constantly put under pressure, in many cases by people, who could be described as ‘small fry’, to have their ODZ plots included in revamped development boundaries.

For instance, since 2006, Mepa has received no fewer than 123 requests for various ODZ parcels of land to be included within development boundaries.

A closer inspection of the above statistic indicates that the Gozitan mindset is probably still at odds with the Eco-Gozo one, as 32 of these requests (over 26 per cent) refer to sites in Gozo.

The locality in Malta with the highest number of ODZ ‘reconsideration’ requests is Dingli, with 17 such requests.

Among a range of issues, the Sped laudably underscores the need to safeguard undeveloped tracts of coastline and biodiversity, and acknowledges that the Gozitan lifestyle and character need to be preserved and public access to the coastline needs to be ensured.

Keeping biodiversity in the public eye

Although Malta has many international and regional obligations to conserve biodiversity, it is no mean feat to maintain the public’s interest in biodiversity-related issues, given the backdrop of

economic meltdown and an array of other environmental issues, including climate change and waste reduction, all jockeying for attention.

So the publication last week of the draft National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) is perfectly poised to keep the public focused on the need to protect biodiversity.

In a nutshell, the voluminous document has 19 targets spread across five policy areas, whose main objectives are for Malta to have a national biodiversity policy driver, and to integrate biodiversity conservation concerns within sectoral and cross-sectoral plans.

Malta is obliged, by 2020, to align its NBSAP with the Convention of Biological Diversity 2011-2020 strategic goals and with its 20 Aichi goals, as well as with the six targets of the EU's Biodiversity Strategy.

A concrete effort has been made within the NBSAP to water down the rigours of the technical jargon and to make the document more accessible to the layman. This is also reflected in its long-term vision and in the working theme, which has a user-friendly ring to it – 'Working hand in hand with nature'.

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The number of requests Mepa has received to include ODZ parcels of land in development boundaries since 2006

Contrary to public perception, Malta is home to almost 5,000 animal species (of which about 4,000 are insects and of which around 80 are endemic, that is, they are known to live only in Malta). They are also home to approximately 1,200 plant species, of which about 25 are strictly endemic and of which three are listed among the top 50 Mediterranean island plants on the brink of extinction.

Despite this, the status of 36 per cent of Maltese species and 29 per cent of Maltese habitats listed in the EC Habitats Directive (mainly marine species and habitats) is still unknown; 44 per cent of species and 64 per cent of habitats do not have a favourable conservation status and therefore require enhanced conservation action.

Elephants, bears being decimated

While from the comfort of their armchairs people engage in platitudes on the need to safeguard biodiversity (and rightly so), others working directly in the thick of things are witnessing the incessant decimation of some species of animals and are powerless to stop the rot.

For example, in Cameroon, after constant requests from the World Wildlife Fund, the government has finally agreed to send the army into a remote national park in the north of the country, after the incursion of gangs of heavily-armed militia from bordering Chad who ruthlessly killed hundreds of elephants for their ivory in the past eight weeks.

It is speculated that the Arab-speaking poachers come from Sudan and that the ivory stash is destined for the Asian market where it will fetch a bounty.

Ironically, the Cameroonian government, after much dithering, finally agreed to take action to defend its sovereign territory and its people from foreigners, with no mention being made of the elephant slaughter.

The WWF also reported even more bad news when it officially announced that no more brown bears were to be found in Austria, after the last brown bear in the country, Moritz, could not be found in 2011.

The Austrian brown bear population, which was doomed due to its small number and constant poaching, depends on natural migration of individual bears from the core population in Slovenia, and efforts have been ongoing during the past 20 years to consolidate the brown bear populations in neighbour-ing countries too by safe-guarding bear migration corridors.

The European Wildlife Network did not mince its words when it recently branded the border area between the Czech Republic, Austria and Hungary as 'The Black Triangle of European Biodiversity' as the border policies of these countries are hampering the cross-boundary migration of large mammals such as wolves and bears, while poaching is widespread and is rarely addressed.

This explains why, for example, in Hungary there are no brown bears while in neighbouring Romania and Slovakia, brown bear populations range from 800 to 5,000.