

The green whistle-blower

With the onset of the sizzling summer heat, our coastal resources literally become the bone of contention between the conservation authorities, such as NGOs and conscientious citizens, and developers.

Two stories which grabbed the headlines during last month are those concerning Hondoq ir-Rummien and Golden Bay.

As regards the former, the momentum to develop the area has been gathering pace over some time now. First, in June the Labour Opposition made public its favourable stance towards the project, announcing that it would give it carte blanche at the drop of a hat.

Then, in July, it transpired that a local draughtsman firm, on behalf of Gozo Prestige Holidays, is working on the project plans, with artistic impressions of the proposed yacht marina at Hondoq ir-Rummien even being available on the Internet. Surely, an iota of rationale and amour-propre for this country would advise dismissing the idea outright, especially considering that the entire Maltese coastline, from Salina to Marsascala, with some havens, is unfit for bathing due to maritime activities such as yacht marinas, that the vintage pristine water at Hondoq ir-Rummien would be jeopardised with effluents, such as anti-fouling paints from boats and that the idyllic views of the entire south-eastern Gozo coastline, visible from both Comino and Malta, would be marred once and for all. Yet all this wisdom peters away in front of the cheek of certain Maltese developers.

Speaking of proverbial cheeks, one cannot but mention the almost legendary illegal flight of steps at Golden Bay which, after MEPA had painstakingly demolished a previous one on the same site some months ago, was duly rebuilt by the developer.

In a disarming display of roughshod tactics and arrangiarsi attitude, the Internet Café (ominously placed right in the middle of the Golden Bay dune) owner's architect is playing for time by exploring all legal avenues available, even though an enforcement on the stairs has been placed by MEPA.

Premonitions indicate to only one thing - the developer will comply in removing the stairs, which blatantly criss-cross highly vulnerable sand dune vegetation at the end of summer, when the stairs would have served their function in bolstering the café's business. Now it's up to MEPA to live up to its billing and effect the enforcement notice it has issued and to make the developer pay for his misdemeanours rather than fork out taxpayers' money.

July also saw the ever-growing phenomenon of community environmental awareness gaining more prominence when Lija residents and the Lija council jointly and vociferously voiced their dissent against the proposed development of a 'green' area in Lija, at Preziosi Street into an elderly residential building. The same application had been refuted in 1996 on the same watertight grounds which should ensure that the same decision is emulated this time round.

The earmarked area, in fact, is outside a development zone and is embellished with over 40 olive trees, some of which are purported to be over 400 years old. The fact that AX Holdings, with its proposed Verdala golf course, and existing green chimeras, such as the quarries peppering the Naxxar-Gharghur area, is also behind this project raises some eyebrows about the green credentials of the company.

During July, Nature Trust (Malta) also highlighted the dilapidated state of two idyllic sites - i.e. Dahlet ix-Xmajjar, at the extremity of L-Ahrax peninsula, and the environs of Anchor Bay. In the former, domestic waste is the culprit while in the latter mounds of discarded building rubble tarnish the environs of the picturesque Popeye's Village. With the plethora of cases of makeshift dumps ever increasing all around our islands, a useful suggestion would be establish a specially-trained and equipped section to come to grips with such problems.

Although the Ministry of Resources and Infrastructure has ironed out successfully some dumps, such as the Xghajra-Kalkara one, there is still a large backlog to cover, such as the Bahrija (behind the church) case and the Wied l-Ispiranza (Mosta) one, besides the two aforementioned ones.

Besides being the anniversary of US independence, the Fourth of July is also less widely known as the day when cetaceans such as whales and dolphins which died in captivity are remembered. Nature Trust (Malta) used the occasion to express its vehement opposition to dolphinariums in Malta, of which we have one.

Silver linings

As usual, one must resort to mentioning the silver linings of the month so as to fizzle away the pall. Commendable decisions made by MEPA included the one made to recommend to government that the area dubbed as Dawret il-Fekruna in Xemxija be left unscathed of any building development and that its scheduling status as a Level 1 area be fostered.

The area in question, besides having a high panoramic appeal, was composed mainly of blue clay, which is highly susceptible to erosion, and so had all the credentials to be spared from the proposed building of two villas.

Other laudable decisions included the repudiation of yet another tuna farm application, this time a stone's throw from the existing tuna cages of Azzopardi Fisheries and the proposed marine reserve at Qawra. Also, the Gozo Ministry and the Ministry of Resources and Infrastructure embarked upon the clean-up of Comino, whereby 20 years of accumulated waste were removed.

In the same vein, MEPA instituted the Comino Steering Committee, upon which Nature Trust (Malta) is represented, to better nurture the island.

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