

Three difficult but wise decisions



Yet another case of lack of environmental monitoring. Throughout the first two weeks of this month, massive dredging works were conducted within the outer reaches of Marsamxett Harbour, close to Manoel Island and Tigné Point, with plumes of turbid, silty water polluting the otherwise clear water. Did the authorities impose the use of a silt curtain on the developers?

Government made three difficult but wise decisions in the course of one week (a long time in politics, as they say):

- the ditching of golfing plans for Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra;
- to keep up the tree-planting momentum in the wake of the outrage at the Red Tower in Mellieha; and
- to cut short the spring hunting season once no restraining action was taken by hunters.

Politicians have finally woken up to the fact that environmental issues are currently at the top of every agenda - in fact, former prime minister Alain Juppé has been named environment minister in France's new centre-right government under President Nicolas Sarkozy. He will head a powerful new super-ministry that encompasses the energy and transport sectors and will be responsible for sustainable development.

Mr Juppé's appointment reflects Mr Sarkozy's desire to make the environment a core theme of government action. In his investiture speech on May 16 the new President pledged to make climate change one of his top international priorities. During the election campaign Mr Sarkozy reiterated France's call for an EU carbon tax on imports from countries without formal commitments under the Kyoto protocol.

He pledged to restart an ecological taxation reform abandoned by previous governments following fuel tax protests in 2000, and said sales taxes on greener products should be reduced to 5.5 per cent instead of the standard 19.6 per cent.

Other pledges included offering reduced road toll rates for low-emission vehicles and making biofuels tax free. Mr Sarkozy wants to follow Germany and Switzerland in taxing incoming heavy goods vehicles to reduce internal traffic. He also supports the creation of a new generation of nuclear reactors by 2020. Maybe his green credentials blossomed after visiting ravaged Malta?

No trade-offs

After the laudable decision to remove Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra from the list of potential golf course sites, one hopes that this was not simply a trade-off for other future sacrificial lambs, such as Ta' Cenc and Hondoq ir-Rummien. Contrary to rumours, the NGOs, which have been designated as site managers at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra (Din l-Art Helwa and Nature Trust), are still staunchly opposed to golf course plans for these two sites.

Electioneering

With the general election less than a year away, some lobby groups are raising their hoarse voices, using the upcoming elections as leverage. The following are a few cases:

Bahrija - the area in front of the church, which was cleared of the building rubble dumped unceremoniously a few years back and which has been earmarked for developers by some individuals, despite exhortations by Minister George Pullicino to the contrary. One hopes that the minister retains his intransigent stance on the issue.

St Thomas Bay boathouses - With an election on the doorstep, the 'owners' of illegal ODZ boathouses at St Thomas Bay have decided to submit applications for sanctioning. MEPA must adopt a coherent strategy here and issue a blanket refusal on all such applications so as not

to give any opportunities for recrimination by setting precedents, etc. Such squatter eyesores should be demolished once and for all.

Sqaq il-Harrub - PA 04308/04 refers to the construction of basement parking and overlying dwellings at Sqaq il-Harrub, close to the 'old' part of Marsascala. On May 3, a decision in this case was again postponed - MEPA should ask the developer to withdraw his application once and for all since, although the site is Inside Scheme, the Temporary Buildings Schemes of the late 1980s have been superseded by the Trees and Woodland Protection Regulations (2002), by LN 257 (Environment Protection Act, amendments of 2003) and by the South Malta Local Plan (approved in 2006).

The business community at Marsascala was vociferous in denouncing pollution from fish farms - they should now be consistent in respecting the integrity of the area in question, rather than lobbying for an approval. Street lighting is being provided for a section of the earmarked area - is this a sign of things to come?

It is also rumoured that plans are in the pipeline to divert all traffic from the seaside fairways through Sqaq il-Harrub, to develop a fully pedestrianised area which would benefit the business community.

Various planning case updates

Birkirkara carobs - an inspection was carried out by MEPA on April 9, when it transpired that a former path was being widened to build a new road. However, to stabilise this new thoroughfare the excess rubble was shoved onto the underlying valley and because of this three carob trees were partly buried under the material.

Carob trees (*Ceratonia siliqua*) are listed in Schedule II of the Trees and Woodlands Protection Regulations and are thus protected. However, according to 7 (3) of the regulations: "No person shall bury in the ground or attempt to bury in the ground, deposit or attempt to deposit any soil, manure, waste, rubbish, stones, rubble, scrap metal or any other form of refuse near any tree listed in the Schedules I, II or III or near any tree sited in an area listed in Schedule IV to these regulations."

A further inspection was carried out on April 24, after which the real culprits of these environmental infringements were identified - it is hoped that remedial action will be taken by those involved (e.g., clearing of such rubble and planting of carob trees in an alternative site).

Mtahleb (Xaghra tal-Vigarju, I/o Bahrija) - in response to a query originally submitted to MEPA by the Ramblers' Association on April 6, apart from the enforcement action normally taken in such circumstances, the perpetrator is being taken to court under the Development Act for causing injury to a protected site. The development consist of illegal engineering works, cutting of rock, the deposit and levelling of inert material, and the installation of a gate and pilasters within a property that is scheduled according to law.

The land is situated in a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), of Ecological, Scientific and International Importance.

A letter to prosecute in terms of Art 56 (3) was issued on May 9. The court is being asked to apply the provisions envisaged in Article 56 (1) of the Development Planning Act 1 of 1992 consisting of a fine of between Lm500 and Lm50,000.

Valley football pitches - PA 05219/05 relating to the development of football pitches and other ancillary services (such as a car park, etc.) on the valley side of Wied il-Kbir at Hal Farrug was laudably refuted unanimously by MEPA's DCC Board on May 8. This was the reconsideration stage - one hopes that, if the developer persists, even at the appeal stage, no change of tack in the decision-making occurs, despite another board being involved.

Yet another ODZ petrol station?

This column published photos of rural Triq Buqana (between Rabat and Mosta) two weeks ago, which has been earmarked for the relocation of a kerbside petrol station currently in Floriana.

After the controversial approval of another ODZ petrol station at Attard last year, there are concerns also for this other ODZ site, which lies in an Aquifer Protection Zone and within an Area of High Landscape Value. In addition, the PDS (Project Description Statement) for the same project does not provide for the mitigation of light pollution.

EU news

From the European Environmental Bureau (EEBB), which pools over 140 NGOs, we learn that last Tuesday, in Strasbourg, MEPs voted to increase the number of potentially toxic chemicals to monitor under the auspices of the proposed REACH (Regulation, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals) legislation - now, certain components of sunscreen lotions as well as potential hazards such as quinoxifen, glyphosate and mecoprop (water pollutants) have been added to the list.

However, in what seem to have been Janus-faced developments, the European Parliament has given the nod to several far-reaching exemptions under pressure from industry which could undermine the integrity of the Water Framework Directive, Helsinki and OSPAR Conventions.

On Monday, environmental groups around Europe popped the champagne bottles to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the EU's Habitats Directive, whose major achievement has been the

setting up of a Europe-wide network of protected sites known as Natura 2000.

Such a network, described as "the backbone of Europe's conservation efforts", now encompasses around one sixth of the total European territory. However, the Brussels-based networks of the European Habitats Forum (EHF), the European coalition of nature protection organisations, still believes that some EU members, notably Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria, must speed up their Natura 2000 designation efforts.

On May 3, environmental and health NGOs welcomed the first reading given by the Environment and Public Health Committee of the European Parliament to the proposed regulation to ban EU mercury exports and ensure the safe storage of surplus mercury.

"The proposals from the parliamentarian responsible for the file to really strengthen the regulation got a significant degree of support," Elena Lymberidi, the EEB's project co-ordinator of the Zero Mercury Campaign, said. "The committee gave a clear signal that the scope of the export ban should be opened up to include certain mercury compounds, as well as those mercury-containing products that are prohibited for sale in the EU."

The committee also clarified that protection of EU citizens must be further ensured by a ban on the imports of metallic mercury. However, despite encouraging progress towards a mercury export ban, NGOs would like to have seen a closer implementation date than December 1, 2010, which poses a greater risk of mercury contamination worldwide.

They also regret that not all mercury compounds were included in the ban, contrary to the 2006 European Parliament's resolution on the issue.

Following publication of the report by the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) on May 4, which confirms the EU's analysis that global emissions must start to fall within the next 15 years and then be cut to around half of 1990 levels by 2050 if the world is to have a fair chance of preventing irreversible and possibly catastrophic global changes, European Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas called on developed and advanced developing countries to commit to substantially reducing their greenhouse gas emissions over the coming decades.

The IPCC report's main findings include:

1. Without action global greenhouse gas emissions will be 25 to 90 per cent above current levels by 2030, with the highest growth levels in the transport sector. Two-thirds or more of the global emissions growth will come from developing countries, but per capita emissions in 2030 will still be substantially higher in developed countries than in developing nations.
2. Limiting average global warming to 2°C above the pre-industrial level will require by 2050 a cut in greenhouse gas emissions of more than 50 per cent of current levels.
3. Such low emissions scenarios can be achieved at a cost of less than three per cent of global GDP by 2030, a fraction of the overall growth over this period.
4. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions will cut air pollution, and therefore also its associated health costs, improve energy security and increase employment. Near-term health benefits from reduced air pollution can offset a substantial part of the cost of mitigating greenhouse gas emissions.
5. The technologies and potential to reduce emissions exist in all main emitting sectors, i.e. energy supply, transport, buildings, industry, agriculture, forestry and waste, in both developed and developing countries.
6. Long-term targets for stabilising the global temperature can be achieved using a portfolio of existing commercially available technologies as well as technologies in the pipeline. What are needed are sufficient incentives to develop and deploy them. Establishing a price for carbon creates such incentive and can be achieved through taxes, charges and tradable permit systems.

Calculating your carbon footprint

Carbon Dioxide is one of the greenhouse gases being implicated in causing global warming. Each of us is responsible for bolstering the atmospheric levels of such a gas, through our daily activities - the carbon calculator, available at www.mycarbonfootprint.eu allows one to quantify one's own carbon footprint (i.e. the total amount of carbon dioxide released through the combustion of fossil fuels).

Silver linings

Global warming initiatives - Corporate awareness of the need to take the global warming bull by the horns is growing. Two cases in point are the commitments by EuroStar and Land Rover. The former, after conducting a company-wide audit, has launched the Thread Lightly programme, consisting of 10 measures designed to slash the company's carbon dioxide emissions by 25 per cent by 2012. The programme is based on three tiers: reducing usage wherever possible; sourcing supplies responsibly; and recycling what is used or produced.

Church commission's work - The Church's Environmental Commission continues to be one of the local leaders of environmental awareness. In fact, it has urged devotees of Blessed Gorg Preca to compensate for the carbon dioxide emissions caused by their trip to Rome for his canonisation on Sunday; it has conducted an environmental audit to quantify and dissect its

carbon footprint; it distributed a leaflet last December to 100,000 families to highlight the best ways to make domestic use of water and electricity, and last week read prayers during Mass focusing on the global warming issue.

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