

Further cluttering fishing ports



Plans to relax building heights in touristic areas could spell even more sprawl and concrete eyesores in places like Xlendi.

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority recently released for public consultation a policy document that is proposing to further relax building height limitations in touristic areas, presumably to permit the upgrading of existing hotels. This will give rise to the proliferation of jarring monoliths in these areas.

However, the broad category of 'touristic areas' also encompasses not only urbanised coastlines peppered with high-rise blocks, such as Sliema, St Julian's and St Paul's Bay, but also largely uncluttered fishing ports such as Xlendi, Marsaxlokk and Mgarr (Gozo).

The policy document restricts possible increases in building heights to two floors above thresholds listed in applicable local plans and excludes Urban Conservation Areas and Residential Priority Areas. However, the proposal could usher in a new era of sore thumbs in coastal areas, and the eyesores will be most acute in former fishing ports.

The motivation behind the policy may be noble, namely to help local hotels remain competitive by enabling them to reach their full height and potential as delineated in the local plan. But its consequences may be dire, further unravelling the few characteristics left of our traditional fishing ports.

Time to safeguard snorkellers too

The tragic death of Charles Brignone, a snorkeller who presumably was hit by a seacraft last summer, is still vivid in the collective imagination of many snorkellers, who often have to overcome a sense of foreboding before venturing outside bathing zones.

Some time ago I had made a proposal to the Environment Ministry in this column to extend bathing zones by designating 'snorkelling corridors' flanking coastal areas. The ministry has welcomed the proposal and plans to create such a corridor skirting the coastal stretch between Golden Bay and Ghajn Tuffieha.

Within the corridor, snorkellers would be protected against recreational craft whizzing past at high speed or fishing vessels deploying trammel nets and other fishing gear just a few metres away from land.

A fifth of Europe is a nature reserve

A recent European Environmental Agency (EEA) report indicates that sites in the Natura 2000 network, which offer protection for vulnerable wildlife and habitats, now account for 18 per cent of the EU's land territory.

Areas that offer more general protection, including nationally and locally designated sites, now cover 21 per cent of the land territory of countries that are members of, or collaborate with, the European Environment Agency.

Despite this good news, the EEA itself admits that there is still a lot of headway to be made. In fact, less than 20 per cent of the species and habitats listed by the Habitats Directive have favourable conservation status and only four per cent of the marine waters within the EU's jurisdiction are included in Natura 2000 sites.

The report may be viewed at www.eea.europa.eu/publications/protected-areas-in-europe-2012.

Driving fishermen to bankruptcy

In a long-overdue overhaul of the Common Fisheries Policy, European fisheries ministers reached a provisional deal last month which would see a further increase in the capacity of fishing fleets.

This measure, which could lead to further overfishing, would overshadow the introduction of selective nets for the elimination of discards.

The provisional deal has been lambasted not only by environmental groups but also by Environment Commissioner Maria Damanaki, who hails from Greece, a country with a strong fishing legacy. Enabling fish stocks to return to healthy and sustainable levels would result in an increase in landings, profit and income for the fisheries sector and fishermen, according to a new independent study Socio-Economic Benefits of a Bold EU Fisheries Reform.

The study may be viewed at http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/final_socio_eco_nomic_benefits_study_16_10_12.pdf.

This research, carried out by Framian BV and commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund, is the first to examine the potential social and economic benefits of the fisheries sector from a purely EU perspective, and provides strong arguments for an ambitious reform of Europe's fisheries.

It argues that if politicians vote for a strong EU fisheries reform with proper implementation that will allow fish stocks to recover, in just 10 years' time:

- EU fishermen could land an additional 2.8 million tons of sustainably caught fish, an increase of around 80 per cent;
- The fisheries sector could generate an extra income of €2.1 billion per year, a rise of around 80 per cent;
- Across the EU, income per fisherman could be up to 50 per cent higher on average than it is today.

The upshot is that it is not quotas and greater regulation by the EU that ultimately drives fishermen to bankruptcy – the real culprits are wrong (and often populist) decisions that promote further overfishing.

Bees vs elephants

As one might imagine from their sheer size, elephants can be destructive, flattening everything in their path. More ominously, elephants have been known to kill farmers and landowners, especially in African nations like Kenya, where expanding Shambas (small farms) are encroaching on traditional migratory routes of elephants, which are often implanted in their proverbially good memories.

In order to minimise attrition between farmers and elephants, the charity Bees Abroad promotes bee-keeping among Kenyan farmers, with multifarious benefits for the farming community.

While the honey can be sold to alleviate poverty, bees are instrumental for pollination and help ward off elephants. A stung elephant will do its utmost to avoid passing even close to a bee hive.

Elephants' good memories and bees' spiteful character come into play here. Once stung, elephants will remember it forever and the indigenous bees are known to chase offenders until they inflict their sting.

The UN recently presented an award to Lucy King for her pioneering work to promote the use of bees as a deterrent against elephant encroachment.

She found that elephants do not feed on trees with hives of African honeybees and will run away upon hearing a playback of recordings of the insects.

Her work demonstrated that the application of biological concepts can provide solutions to such problems.

For further information on this innovative project, visit www.beesabroad.org.uk.

www.alandeidun.eu