

Ripping Ta' Ċenċ apart



Hoarding keeps prying eyes from seeing the development taking place in the valley of Mġarr ix-Xini.

When the spectre of development at Ta' Ċenċ was first raised, there was uproar, and various NGOs joined efforts to rightly condemn and oppose the proposals, which were subsequently watered down.

But what is currently going on at the idyllic Il-Kantra ta' Mġarr ix-Xini, which lies within the confines of Ta' Ċenċ, has sadly not resulted in the same reaction.

PA 5216/04 was submitted in 2004 and proposed the upgrading of existing beach facilities, such as snack bar, kitchen and toilets, and the construction of a natural rock pool and overflow stream. Predictably, this was opposed by the then Environment Protection Department (EPD) of the Planning Authority, which strongly objected to the swimming pool as this would encroach on garigue habitat.

The department's report said: "...its construction would impinge on the ecology and natural topography of the area... Furthermore, the construction of the swimming pool on this site would be totally out of context and would impinge on the landscape value of the area."

Since then, the proposals were watered down somewhat to reduce the amount of rock-cutting, but a permit was still granted for a swimming pool on site and for a total footprint, including facilities and paving, of 228 square metres, which is significantly higher than the 168 square metres footprint of the current structures.

The EPD's valid objection to the swimming pool was conveniently brushed aside and the pool is currently being etched out of the rock face.

In line with what has recently become the norm, the case officer's report recommending the granting of the permit includes an exhaustive list of conditions that the developer should abide by. The list includes, for example, the conditions that development should be limited to the existing concrete platform without any encroachment on undisturbed land; that no new or extended vehicular access should be created; that the canopy is constructed in timber and light pollution is curbed.

However, as can be seen in the accompanying photo, the area that is being excavated is rubbing shoulders with garigue vegetation and possibly even with endemic plants; such as the Maltese spurge.

Also, we should ask how was the machinery in the photo brought on site? Unless it was flown in and lowered down from the air, it must have been driven over the rock face and vegetation all the way to the site, as can be seen by the trail of soiled markings left behind on the surface.

Considering the sensitivity of the site, it would be interesting to check whether any bank guarantee was linked to the granting of the permit. The developer faces no obstacles to eradicate any protected plant species that may lie in the way of the development, especially since continuous onsite environmental monitoring is conspicuous by its absence.

One may be excused for being cynical when it is announced that a new site has been scheduled or included in a protected list, as such designations have not proved to be a deterrent against unabashed development.

For instance, the site in question is not only an Outside Development Zone, it is also endowed with a number of other designations that would normally be enough to ward off even the most hardened developers.

In fact, in view of its ecological and geomorphological importance, the site is scheduled as a Level 1 Area of Ecological Importance and Site of Scientific Importance. The site is also located within an Area of High Landscape Value and as a Category A valley in the draft Gozo and Comino Local Plan.

One questions the wisdom of granting such a permit in one of the most beautiful places in Gozo, which simply serves the whims of a few well-heeled people who would rather dip their delicate toes in pool water than in sea water.

With such alluring sea at Mgarr ix-Xini just below the site, how can anyone even think of ripping apart the rock face to have a swimming pool? This is undoubtedly another dent in the eco-Gozo scheme.

Of lizards and property collectors

In view of the gaffes that representatives and members of the recently set-up Malta Developers' Association (MDA) are prone to, which are blowing what's left of developers' already tarnished reputation to smithereens, it is high time that it seeks the services of a seasoned public relations officer.

For instance, MDA president Michael Falzon recently lashed out at the Malta Environment and Planning Authority for what he perceives as unjust fees being saddled on developers, which in turn are apparently being used to finance its collection of lizards, among other purposes.

In another bout of chronic ineptitude, a developer at the same event (who presumably is an MDA member) lamented that developers were not being allowed to "collect" properties in the same way that vintage car collectors do.

Upon reading such a statement, one wonders whether to cringe or sneer. All talk of the year 2010 being designated by the UN as the International Year for Biodiversity, of the Maltese wall lizard being restricted to the Maltese archipelago and the islands of Linosa and Lampione (and nowhere else in the world), and of lizards and other indigenous animals and plants having a more rightful place in Malta than swathes of concrete, seems to be lost on Mr Falzon.

In fact, Mr Falzon seems to be using his old political tools yet again by pandering to the masses by deriding aspects of the natural heritage, namely by using the Maltese term gremxul, which unfortunately carries a disparaging sense to it, in the same way that xagħri (garigue) does.

Ever since steering the establishment of the Planning Authority in the early 1990s, Mr Falzon has undergone a complete change.

He first pandered to the Baħar iċ-Ġaġħaq caravan community, and later became involved in developments of questionable wisdom. Most recently he has become head of a resurgent developer's lobby in Malta.

Since developers are largely responsible for the sad state of local biodiversity and habitats it is only right they should be asked to fund research in lizard populations and other similar aspects of fauna and flora. You could call it corporate social responsibility.

Spotlight on biological sciences

The annual Biology Symposium organised by the University's Department of Biology will be held on Saturday between 8.30 a.m. and 1.30 p.m. at the John Borg Hall on campus.

The event showcases current research being conducted in biological sciences and gives the public an insight into this riveting world.

The symposium's significance this year is heightened as it coincides with the designation by the UN of 2010 as the International Year for Biodiversity.

Among the various presentations to be given at the symposium is one on the formation of penises on female marine snails after being exposed to certain anti-fouling paints used mainly in the yachting industry.

Others will deal with the use of prickly pear derivatives to combat cancer, the conservation of the endemic honey bee, and the ecological importance of local sites.

For details view https://secure.um.edu.mt/eventsitems/biology_symposium_20_nov .

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