

The green whistle-blower



The dilapidated state of the Victoria Lines - with rubble being recklessly dumped at various points along the fortifications - should be a shame to the whole nation.

The heralding of summer was accompanied by an upsurge in environmental degradation and Gozo was once again one of the major victims.

The sister island's north-east and east coasts, in particular, present different issues, all of which need to be addressed urgently. In the idyllic valley of San Blas, where works to open a dubious road for agricultural purposes resulted in the destruction of part of the watercourse, the dust seems to have settled on the whole matter.

The road in question is literally a cul-de-sac, ending in a mound of reeds so characteristic of valley beds, while it is much wider than deemed fit for agricultural vehicles.

In the valley leading to Marsalforn, alien and invasive eucalyptus trees were recklessly planted close to vulnerable chaste trees without anyone batting an eyelid, while the now notorious illegal development at Qala by a local MP, where, in an analogy to the Solemar case, the permit precincts were grossly and illegally surpassed to turn a farming dwelling into a fully-fledged villa, appears to have been already relegated to the back burner. It is only when infringements by people on higher rungs are ironed out that the much quoted man in the street would be slightly deterred from flouting the law himself.

The degradation of the coastal garigue at Ta' Cenc has all the hallmarks of a dress rehearsal for the planned golf course in the area. The constructions, which have encroached further close to the cliffs, have further stifled the garigue in the area with rubble and makeshift roads, only to legitimise the opening of a golf course on site so as to allegedly "embellish a degraded site". Let us hope that the decision to turn down the Pembroke golf course which was partly presented on such grounds is also emulated at Ta' Cenc.

June also saw Nature Trust reiterate its position on the worrying developments at Xemxija and St Paul's Bay where unbridled development is fouling the coastal resource punters so keenly enjoy in the area. Even though our dry islands are carpeted with garigue, with very small pockets of dense maquis with small trees, we let villas and bungalows rub shoulders with this endangered habitat and their developers smother it with rubble with no action whatsoever being taken.

The area in question, with the mushrooming and esoteric sounding Wardija Hilltop Village, Tal-Fjuri area, Xemxija, Mistra Eyesores?, etc, is losing all its rustic appeal. Besides, travelling along the Bugibba-Xemxija bypass, one is appalled to see a gargantuan block of flats right above the undergrowth of surrounding flats obliterating views of St Paul's Islands.

Recently, during a Parliamentary debate, it transpired that there were only a handful of applications for high-rise buildings in our islands. The newspaper report failed to highlight the fact, however, that with high-rise buildings, technocrats refer to those buildings which are 15 or 20 storeys high, such as the 31-storey building being proposed for Qawra. Hence, such a definition does not cover the deplorable St Paul's Bay building.

A chronic lack of space in our islands would make it logical to develop vertically and this should be encouraged as much as possible as long as idyllic sites are not tampered with.

In the year dedicated to eco-tourism, a group of local NGOs - Nature Trust, Din I-Art Helwa, Grupp Arkeologiku Malti and Friends of the Earth - highlighted the dilapidated state of the Victoria Lines, a gem of our military architecture but which we fail to conserve successfully.

In fact, although last year part of the fortifications were restored by the restoration unit of the former Ministry for the Environment, many lacunae still exist. These include many stones which are dislodged to build trapping hides, rubble and waste which was bulldozed right in the middle of the Lines at Falka Gap (between Dwejra Lines and Targa Battery) resulting in the disruption of part of the fortifications and the dangerous and friable drop-off from part of the Lines into an adjacent quarry.

Although some timid attempt at afforestation and landscaping is being attempted around the quarry, the NGOs' call for the authorities to insist that much more be done by quarry operators in the area, responsible for the destruction of Wied il-Ghasel, such as fully-fledged schemes to remove rubble and to landscape the area.

Nature Trust is also following the situation at St Thomas Bay by asking MEPA to monitor any further illegal developments in the bay, especially a dubious restaurant.

Silver linings

June however also had its silver linings. In particular, we witnessed the commissioning by MEPA of a benthic survey on the seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* in our islands. Such a highly commendable project would generate a location map of the highly vulnerable seagrass (crucial as a fish nursery, to trap suspended sediment which smothers light penetration, to fix important nutrients such as nitrogen and to assuage wave action in the erosion of our coastal areas among other functions).

Many important future decisions regarding the siting of fish farms or some major coastal projects, such as marinas, would hinge upon such a map.

Also laudable were two separate initiatives embarked upon by two different entities. MEPA undertook the clean-up of the rubble in the Hagar Qim-Mnajdra area while the gruelling clean-up of the Xghajra-Kalkara coastline was conducted by the Works Division of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Resources.

Nature Trust was the only NGO to blow the whistle on both issues during Bondi+ on TVM on March 19. In both cases, let us hope that at least there is a follow-up by both entities, properly monitoring the site to avoid ending up with a hill of beans.

In the month during which talk about sustainable waste management reached fever-pitch, searches for vacant quarries as a suitable site for the dumping of rubble by the ministry is also laudable, but more results need to be seen.

The momentum to give the go-ahead to the first golf course in our islands was somewhat blighted in June when MEPA turned down the application to build one right in the middle of scheduled garigue at Pembroke.

One has the strange feeling, however, that we should not be content with the decision till we know the outcomes of the applications for the other

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