

Turning Ramla into a giant disco



Set up just metres away from the watercourse leading protected sand dunes at Ramla l-Hamra, this camping site is bound to impact the site.

Maltese beaches on a Sunday afternoon are not renowned for their languor. Rather, they are associated with overcrowded conditions, cacophony and encroachments of all sorts.

As has been documented in this column over the years, each year more nails are driven into the coffin, with more beaches being taken over by boisterous hordes who have no grasp of what constitutes good neighbourliness.

Last Sunday, a visit to Ramla l-Hamra for a peaceful swim was frustrated by throbbing music at decibels unacceptable to anyone in their right mind, let alone to young children. The noise pollution was spilling onto the beach from the nearby kiosks, courtesy of the umpteenth party. In this case it was the Sunscape Festival 2015, which was held at the beach over three full days. The music played on till 2am the following morning.

I am informed that the Malta Tourism Authority objected to the party being held at Ramla l-Hamra; however, the Ministry of Gozo allegedly issued the permit for the event to go ahead, against a number of conditions. A statement from the ministry on this subject would be in order, especially considering that its remit presumably includes safeguarding Gozitan families' right to enjoy some peace and quiet on a public beach without having to compete with a party crowd.

The conditions included steering away from the protected sand dunes in this Natura 2000 site and Blue Flag beach. The organisers did not object and the festival stage and the camping tents were cluttered in fields by the watercourse.

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Environmental NGO Gaia, which has for years been entrusted to manage the site, were correct when it said that none of the site's protected areas were encroached upon. However, the proximity of a large concentration of tents and ancillary facilities to the watercourse leading to the protected dunes raises eyebrows, not least because of the high degree of connectivity and dynamic nature of dune systems.

In a nutshell, the chances of contamination of the watercourse from such an event are high. This is not to mention that turning the area into a makeshift campsite tramples upon any ecological importance that it previously held.

Organising such large-scale parties at Ramla l-Hamra also exacerbate the existing parking problem near the beach, which involves using the clay fields along the slopes leading to the beach for parking purposes, as has been done for the past 20 to 30 years. Besides kicking up

a dust bowl, this parking activity is gradually eroded away the topsoil, consisting of fine clay particles. How could it be that no one is concerned with this matter?

Déjà vu charade at Montekristo estate

The usual charade has been played out at Montekristo estate, which is yet again hosting the annual Il-Fiera il-Kbira. With the site being riven by all sorts of illegal development, it stands to reason that the site's commercial exploitation should be curtailed until these illegalities are ironed out.

So many lauded the seemingly bold stance taken by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority to oppose the issue of a permit for this year's fair at Montekristo as the only logical thing to do. In fact, right up until a few weeks before the fair was scheduled to start the police had still not issued the permit.

But then Montekristo owner Charles Polidano wheeled out his customary trump card... largesse. While in previous years Polidano staved off any enforcement action affecting his business by reminding everyone of the inherent risks of laying off the thousands of people he employed, this time he resorted to another weapon in his arsenal... the number of exhibitors (in this case, 230) that had signed up for the fair. A few days ago, the police permit was issued at appeals stage, and the jubilation of all those who support the upholding of planning legislation was short-lived.

Some of the arguments put forward by Polidano's front men are ludicrous, to say the least. Fair organiser Paul Abela said that, since the last year's fair, no new enforcement notice had been slapped on the exhibition area. This argument is oblivious to the fact that there are numerous other enforcement notices on the site issued prior to last year which are still active.

Yet another of the fair proponents' blinkered argument is that other exhibition sites have been allowed to operate notwithstanding the fact that they were the subject of operational enforcement notices, thus creating a convenient precedent onto which they latched on.

Similarly defying credulity are media reports that Polidano agreed not to carry out finishing works on the upper floors of the office block he developed illegally next to the Montekristo estate, in a token gesture to Mepa when slapped with an enforcement notice on the site, rather than pulling down the office block altogether, as if allowing an illegal structure to stand is perfectly acceptable as long as the structure is unfinished.

If Mepa and the police are serious in taking the Montekristo trade fair by the horns, they should pull up their socks much earlier in the year (say winter or spring), before the fair organisers have had the opportunity to recruit exhibitors and hog the media limelight with their publicity stunts, such as draping the Santa Venera tunnel entrance with a large banner. If Mepa disingenuously leaves it till late to take a stand, it simply plays in the hands of the organisers, who will wheel out the usual sob stories, such as 'how can you say no to 230 exhibitors?'.

Issuing Montekristo with an unambiguous statement of intent by January to the effect that the fair will not be held next year unless all pending enforcement notices are addressed, including those dating before 2014, should avoid this *fait accompli*, which arises when action is taken too late. This would also forewarn potential exhibitors of the constraints facing the site before they make any commitments with the organisers, despite the appealing conditions normally offered to them.

One wonders why it has yet to dawn upon those whose duty it is to bring Montekristo in line to adopt such a logical approach. Will we witness yet another *déjà vu charade* in 2016?

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