

## A nation of land-grabbers



The caravan that was forcibly removed from Ġnejna by Mepa's enforcement section last month.

The Christopher Haber incident, as the infamous thuggery story at Marsaxlokk can be dubbed, has gobsmacked many; but really such poker-faced colonisation of public land and the assumption of impunity is widespread. The Malta Enforcement and Planning Authority's enforcement section have to deal with unsavoury characters on regular basis, with many a close encounter not even making it to the middle pages of newspapers, such as the forced eviction of a caravan/camper at Ġnejna last month.

There are various subtle ways in which land grab is being performed in Malta. A step above the flagrant grab of public land by permanent campers (not the day-trippers or the weekend crowd) are the boathouse owners who lay a stake on public land (or on private land with no permit in the case of St Thomas Bay) through strength in numbers.

*Transport Malta is more effective at encroaching on undeveloped land than any contractor*

**- Alan Deidun**

One step higher on the same rostrum are those who can pay for their illegal extensions to hotels, lidos and beach concessions (at least before the Mepa reform, which made ODZ sanctioning virtually impossible since January 2011). The privatisation of the coast is alive and kicking, as immortalised by anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain, in his 'Contesting the foreshore' (downloadable from [www.oapen.org/download?type=document&docid=340221](http://www.oapen.org/download?type=document&docid=340221)).

But perhaps the pinnacle of subtlety when it comes to land grab occupying are government agencies, such as Transport Malta, which are responsible for encroaching on hectares upon hectares of farmland, garigue and open space in general, officially for the sake of road alignment and widening purposes.

Transport Malta's recently-approved proposals for the Kennedy Grove-Bahar iċ-Ċagħaq stretch of the Coast Road will result in the swallowing of 38,000 square metres of additional land and over 2,000 trees being chopped down, including Judas trees, dwarf fan palms, olives, date palms, tamarisk trees, oaks, Aleppo pine trees, lentisk, poplar trees and common hawthorn trees.

Now Transport Malta has announced its latest land-grab project – a new bypass at Kappara to replace the existing roundabout, supposedly to relieve the traffic gridlock and improve air quality.

Prima facie, the project appears to check all the right boxes – the motivation behind it is pretty solid and residents have been consulted and they do not seem to be against the plans. The only snags are that land at Wied Ġħollieqa will be taken up by the project. Moreover, unless the ever-increasing number of local cars are kept in check, the existing road network will again

need to be widened. Road construction simply cannot keep up with the pace of new car registrations on these islands.

In addition, surprisingly enough, the managers of the Wied Għolliġa special area of conservation have hardly been consulted about the project, despite being involved in the conservation of the valley for about 25 years.

The following online comment in response to one of the newspaper articles on the issue really deserves the biscuit:

"I hope no one will think that some tiny worm in the valley is more important than us, the people who live there."

So blinkered and shortsighted and disrespectful towards all those who dedicated entire summers planting and watering the regenerating woodland in this green lung.

So disrespectful towards all those who donated money to help re-afforest the valley and so disrespectful towards Nature Trust which thwarted plans to turn the valley into an addendum of the University.

Arguments about the ecological importance of the valley and about its protection status would certainly be lost on the wise guy who made this comment.

It has been reported that the preferred project option will result in a footprint ranging between 20 and 155 square metres of land within the valley – one may dismiss this as minimal but the footprint of land in the valley that will be disturbed by the project will really be much more.

One hopes Wied Għolliġa does not go down the same road as Wied Għomor, which has been turned into a narrow watercourse hemmed in by buildings.

Transport Malta is more effective at encroaching on undeveloped land than any contractor – the rub in it all is that it manages to do so surreptitiously, without eliciting large-scale public outcries. Transport Malta's largess and relentless disregard for environmental considerations jars with the government's recently launched national environmental policy.

## **Golden Bay and Blue Flag**

The relationship between Golden Bay (Ramla tal-Mixquqa) and the Blue Flag beach certification has always been a tortuous one.

In fact, the beach was once again given the cold shoulder last June when the list of blue flag beaches in Malta (now totalling six) was released.

There are different reasons behind this sad predicament, some of which are understandable while at least one is particularly galling.

The coveted Blue Flag certification is only assigned when certain benchmarks in water quality and safety, beach management (including accessibility for the disabled), environmental education and information and for the provision of services are met.

It transpires that there is no accessibility for the disabled at Golden Bay and there is no separation of waste on site, both of which are legitimate reasons for ensuring that the Blue Flag status remains elusive for Golden Bay.

However, there is a niggling doubt that in addition to these, there is also another reason for Golden Bay's pariah status – the existence of an enforcement notice, pending since 2002 (EC 00566/02), on a wooden flight of stairs meandering its way through the sand dune remnants at this beach giving access to the internet cafe huddled at the back of the beach.

If such doubts are indeed founded, this irregularities perpetrated by just a few individuals could be precluding this popular beach from acquiring the Blue Flag status.

I will not mention the ecological impact of this flight of steps, since such arguments do not seem to count for much these days.