

A stark lesson from Ireland



The well-preserved and well-marketed Burren in the west of Ireland.

The Irish have a north European knack for impeccably preserving their country and promoting even its most meretricious aspects to the tourist.

Take the Burren, for instance. This vast expanse of mostly barren, sparsely vegetated, exposed limestone outcrops in the west of Ireland, is marketed (and successfully so) with rambling aficionados as the outdoors mecca.

In fact, the Burren is one of the highlights of a visit to County Clare in western Ireland, which ranks at par with a visit to the spectacular Connemara national park.

The uninitiated Maltese observer would probably disparagingly describe the Burren as wasteland, in the same way as most Maltese describe garigue locally.

The stark difference in Irish and Maltese mindsets is very telling – while the Irish preserve the Burren and cherish its natural amenity value and successfully promote it with tourists, we Maltese cut roads through garigue, use it for dumping purposes and to reclaim it for agriculture.

Such a yawning gulf in regional perceptions is probably the biggest stumbling block to attaining a real appreciation of the natural environment in Malta.

34 tumoli for road project

Transport Malta's project description statement (PDS) for the realignment and development of the Coast Road from Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq to St Paul's Bay (PA 3883/08 and PA 3758/09) forwards two options to cater for higher traffic volume to the north of the island and bolster safety along this stretch of road.

The first is considerably more damaging to surrounding rural assets, as it proposes the complete closure of the road through Kennedy Grove and its diversion southwards (through prime agricultural land in Burmarrad) and the enlargement of the Salini roundabout.

The second option simply proposes the widening of the Kennedy Grove stretch of road.

Although the PDS places the two options on the same footing by claiming that they both encroach 38,000 square metres (3.8 hectares, or almost 34 tumoli), the land to be encroached upon in the first option includes prime agricultural land, while the second includes mainly abandoned farmland.

The PDS overtly pushes for the first option in selling it as a quid pro quo proposal. It promises to compensate for the loss of agricultural land by reconstituting the Kennedy Grove camping site and afforested site (as the arterial road severing it will be closed), and two areas of ecological importance – Salini marshland and Għadira s-Safra transitional wetland, both of which are protected through a bevy of various designations.

While one concedes that such developments are indeed commendable, some of what is being proposed verges on the unfeasible to say the least. A case in point is the claim that closing off the Coast Road stretch will provide the opportunity to increase the habitat at Għadira s-Safra, as if a natural community can be planted like a manicured roundabout.

The PDS also dangles another carrot in the proposals – the closure of road access to the Qalet Marku peninsula. This would indeed be a welcome development, especially since the area frequently falls victim to rampant fly-tipping and dumping of bulky refuse, despite its landscape and ecological value. But is such a large-scale road project needed to instigate such a closure?

The PDS provides a number of palliatives aimed at sweetening the proposed rural and ecological impacts, namely through landscaping, which is expected to reduce the impact of noise and particulate emissions on the surroundings.

Such landscaping, however, pales in front of the proposed uprooting of a significant number of mature Aleppo pine trees from the southern flanks of the road. The PDS seeks to redress this through the proposed planting of semi-mature Aleppo pine trees. This is scant solace for the proposed loss of mature trees.

Proponents of the road development project are categorical in advocating some type of change, insisting that the current state of affairs is not acceptable – “The ‘zero scenario’, that is, leaving the situation as is was not contemplated as safety standards of the stretch of road in question are not acceptable, and TM cannot be passive with respect to this problem.

In addition, the ‘do nothing’ could be interpreted that the government of Malta is not serious about its commitment as an EU member state to attain the balanced regional development objectives”.

Since TM is so adamant that a change should be made to the road network at Salini, the second option should be embarked upon as the one with the lower rural footprint of the two proposed.

When one puts in the equation the steady loss of agricultural land in recent times – a 42 per cent decrease from 1956 to 1991, or an average of 285 hectares per year – and the sheer size of the land being encroached upon – almost 10 full-sized football pitches – one hopes that more vociferous and constructive opposition to such proposals are forthcoming from local environmentalists.

Party funding still under wraps

While trumpeting Malta’s faring in European-wide rankings when it comes to unemployment and taxation levels, local authorities should do the same when the subject concerned is less palatable due to Malta’s poor showing.

Political party funding is a case in point. It so happens that Malta is one of just three European countries where there is no legal obligation to publish details of political party financing, with Albania and Denmark being the other two tight-lipped nations.

Despite continuous calls by NGOs and individuals to rectify this scandalous state of affairs and the occasional pledge by the lone ranger MP to do something about the matter, no one has actually picked up where the Galdes Commission left off, a full 15 years ago.

New rambling guide

At least some legacy is left from the International Year of Ecotourism commemorated in 2002 – the publication of yet another rambling guide – Malta 10 Great Walks – by Irishman Emmet McMahon and Jonathan Henwood.

The guide is delightful and refreshing, regaling the visitor with salient natural and historical highlights of each chosen location. The 10 walks take the visitor through the battlements of Valletta, the Three Cities, Marsascala to Marsaxlokk, Qrendi and the Blue Grotto, Buskett and Dingli Cliffs, Ċirkewwa, Victoria Lines, Sliema, Comino and the salt pans of Gozo.

This is surely a must-have for the inveterate Rambler of Malta.