

Life's no beach



A snapshot of a Maltese beach - burgeoning mounds of waste, squatters' tents, caravans and haphazardly parked cars taking up every inch of Għnejna.

It seems that history keeps repeating itself each summer, with the previous year's unresolved coastal issues haunting those who go to the beach.

I was prodded into writing this piece after reading an article in The Times of last Monday titled 'A day at the beach is, all in all, a good treat', in which the sordid aspects of a day at the beach were somewhat overlooked. And after reading the laudable initiative by the Parliamentary Secretary entrusted with the management of public land, Jason Azzopardi, to evict all squatters on public land.

Such an initiative may be a tall order, especially if one were to address illegal squatting on the foreshore as well. While the cheek of many beach concession operators is despicable, especially at Armier and Għadira, some individuals' subtle squatting frequently raises few eyebrows.

The authorities probably choose to turn a blind eye to squatting because it lasts just three months, but it is effectively depriving tens of thousands of people of their right to enjoy the beach.

It is fast turning out to be a battle of wills - there are people who are not willing to budge from a stretch of coast they claim as their own, as enforcement officials remain too lethargic to act, despite the fact that camping locally is not permitted from dusk till dawn.

Locally, this must be the single most flouted piece of legislation. Take Għnejna, for example. The beach, ensconced between clay slopes at the mouth of a lush valley, is literally annexed by owners of caravans and makeshift Bedouin-style tents.

Numerous correspondents have written about the issue, which continues being relegated to the backburner year after year. From June, the authorities should do their utmost to deter possible squatters - these include large natural boulders in the case of Għnejna and CCTV in the case of Mellieħa Bay.

Trying to evict these squatters in mid-August will only serve to stoke the flames and lead to confrontation and arguments.

In spite of sporadic attempts by Mgarr council to regulate amenities on site, the beach remains a free-for-all, with those having the largest and most powerful ware taking over the greatest footprint.

Offroad vehicles reign supreme on the remains of what was once a sand dune. The vehicles are parked right upon the steep sand mounds, destroying any form of vegetation.

The novelty of the importation of larger and sturdier gazebos has also introduced more brazen coastal squatting - like Mellieħa Bay, close to Dawret it-Tonn at the foot of the hill leading up to Mellieħa.

Permanent tents and gazebos are taking over the concrete platform for weeks on end.

Echoes of Mistra case

While at Mistra Bay last weekend, I was reminded of the much-hyped open-air disco proposal, as I observed several camps set up right along the valley sides, accessible only through a narrow footpath snaking through the vegetation.

The impromptu camp site is just above the protected saline marshland at Wied il-Mistra. The campers were even using bright lights which cause further disruption to biotic communities normally accustomed to low light intensities at night.

The campers effectively mirrored the same sort of disturbance that the proposed disco facilities would have wrought, albeit on a smaller scale. Therefore, why aren't we trying to evict them? Is it because we cannot act on environmental issues unless we can derive some political mileage?

Party fever

In the stifling summer heat one should warn against excessive exertion - but it seems to encourage people to party.

The red line is crossed when it comes to the selection of sites for such parties. Organisers often earmark ecologically sensitive areas, as if the intoxicated, inebriated party-goers are in a mood to appreciate the environs around them.

A few weeks back, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority was alerted that a large party gathering was being planned very close to the Wied il-Mizieb Natura 2000 site in Mellieħa, home to the largest wild population of Sandarac gum tree.

Eventually, the party organisers were forced to change the venue of the party to another location in Mellieħa. Other examples include the environs of Paradise Bay and Buskett, which each summer bear the brunt of hordes of youths. It seems that parties generate too much revenue to spare idyllic sites their ravages.

Heading to the beach?

The European Environment Agency and Microsoft have launched a new environmental information portal 'Eye on Earth', displaying the latest information on the water quality in bathing sites across Europe.

Through its first application 'Water Watch', the new portal, allows users to rate beaches and to share their comments with others. The facility is available at:

www.eea.europa.eu/highlights/heading-for-your-favourite-beach-is-the-bathing-water-clean.

Another environmental initiative by Emirates

A major habitat regeneration project has started at Emirates' first luxury Australian conservation resort, Wolgan Valley Resort and Spa. The first step in a long-term conservation programme started with the planting of over 1,000 indigenous trees.

The reforestation project aims to regenerate ecologically sensitive areas within Emirates' Wolgan Valley Reserve and is part of Emirates' Hotels and Resorts' carbon offsetting initiative and its commitment to the protection of biodiversity.

The first resort to be developed by Emirates Hotels and Resorts outside the United Arab Emirates, Wolgan Valley includes an extensive conservation programme, which will reintroduce indigenous species to the 4,000 acre site.

alan.deidun@gmail.com; alan.deidun@um.edu.mt