

## Coastal resources under attack

### Gnejna - planning mayhem and dune eradication



No more umbrellas, please. If I want one, I can ask for it. Beach concessions are restricting space on our sandy beaches to a bare minimum. Such concessions should be better regulated.

Anyone wending his way down to Gnejna Bay in Mgarr on a Sunday afternoon in the sweltering summer heat will certainly get more than he bargained for. He will be confronted with a plethora of cars parked haphazardly on the fringes of the sandy beach and even driven on the clay slopes and on the rocky outcrop to the side of the beach right up to the water's edge.

And if the visitor has a modicum of ecological awareness, the disillusion is even greater when he sees the vestiges of the once luxuriant sand dune being piled (or better still, bulldozed) back by a tailor-made piece of machinery parked on site so as to make way for the passage of cars. Recent plans by MEPA (I believe with the collaboration of the Mgarr council) for an adequate parking system at Gnejna seem to have been shelved or the progress was such that the boat for the mass summer exodus was missed once more this year.

If the scheduled dune area is smothered beneath countless car tyres, the watercourse just behind it is certainly not let off scot-free, being turned into a makeshift dump by those using it as a public amenity area.

And what about the camps set on the beach fringes, literally for whole weeks? Isn't camping on a sandy beach illegal? I believe wardens used to pay the site a visit light years ago - now, nonchalance has settled in. Upon seeing the race to park one's car as close to the sea as possible, the honking of horns and screeching of tyres when some hapless driver ends up bogged down in the sand and hordes milling around some gargantuan blaring speakers, anyone is justified in thinking that the planning system and law enforcement in this country are letting us down mightily. Urgent conservation measures for the Gnejna dune are needed, as well as a civilised parking system. We Maltese should start using our feet and park our cars hundreds of metres away further up the road if needs be.

The mayor of Mgarr, Mr Battistino, rightly highlighted the fact that the council does not grant permits for discos on beaches like Gnejna. And it's here that the dire need for further law enforcement in this country arises - just visit Golden Bay (also within the limits of Mgarr) and you will soon be stunned by the decibels of loud music reverberating around the normally tranquil surroundings of the beach. Is anyone checking these out? Or is the lack of manpower and the late hours involved putting our authorities off?

And lo and behold, when an NGO like Nature Trust (Malta) stretches its sinews to try and stir up things during the summer lull, one finds someone like "Roamer" (The Sunday Times, July 20) who seeks to make up for the current shortage in succulent issues by drooling on the case. Quoting from this column: "Why on earth should a place of beauty be kept in the dark? Sensitive lighting schemes. I am struck by the thought of bulbs furnished with an inbuilt melody rock-a-by-babbling the sweet little beach as it lays itself down to rest", one wonders whether the author consulted some expert in the field before he justified light pollution?

I suggest "Roamer" pay a visit to Dingli Cliffs or any other site plagued by senseless lighting schemes where it is impossible to gaze up at the star-strewn night sky just because some 'bright spark' decided to light up the whole area with globe lights or some similar form of lighting.

Whoever said that Gnejna should be kept in the dark? What's wrong with downward-facing lights? Why waste valuable energy to throw up invasive light in the night sky? Why are we not sensitive to light pollution, like the rest of the world?

## **Dawret il-Fekruna - again in the headlines for the wrong reasons**

It seems that Xemxija is too juicy a pawn for our developers who are always hovering relentlessly over the area. In fact, after that the cheeky attempt by a developer to revoke the scheduling of a coastal area, sited between Rdum Stoppin and Dawret il-Fekruna, which is steeped among clay cliffs and which is scheduled as a Level 2 Area of Ecological Importance, in order to build two villas overlooking the sea, was rightly refused by MEPA one year ago, a new application to MEPA (03737/03) for the total demolition of existing premises and construction of residential apartments at Mare D'Oro, Shipwreck Promenade, St Paul's Bay.

Mare D'Oro directly overlooks Fekruna Bay. It seems that no hindsight has been gleaned from the monstrous Xemxija Heights blocks of apartments which stick out like sore thumbs since this application basically wants to convert a low-lying building into more eyesores in the form of an apartment block.

Is there such a prolific demand for these apartment blocks? MEPA should also start considering applications on the merits of viability - i.e., if the developer can clearly show that he has clients interested in the property to avoid cramming our coastline with ghost blocks used merely by developers to save some earnings from the taxman's clutches. Let's hope that the visual appeal of Xemxija as well as its last strongholds of natural beauty are safeguarded by MEPA.

## **Beach concessions - public injustice**

By paying paltry sums, licensees are being allowed, under the misnomer of beach concessions, to elbow out not-so-well-heeled members of the public from a meagre portion of sandy beach. Conditions at Ghadira, Armier, Little Armier and Paradise Bay are approaching the last straw for many, as those hiring umbrellas and other paraphernalia are extending their hardware over increasingly larger tracts of the beach, hence effectively elbowing out those unwilling to pay for a place in the shade.

Operators on other beaches, such as at Golden Bay and Gnejna, at least have the decency not to spread out their hardware from the early hours, leaving it entirely up to the visitor to approach them and ask for their services.

On second thoughts, however, their modus operandi stems from the fact that they are the sole operators on their respective beach, hence free from any competition.

Especially galling are the concessions given to hotels, which even resort to fence off part of the beach for the private use of their residents, as has happened at Cirkewwa and even more recently at Ramla tal-Bir in Marfa in a new restaurant/disco development where an in-house beach reclamation exercise was even embarked upon using sand in what was formerly a rocky area next to Enemalta's Gozo cable sign, with palms even being planted on the newly-fledged beach.

This could well be a prospective solution for the future - limiting so-called beach concessions to just one operator per beach (so as to restrict competition which fuels the urge to occupy every bit of sand), on condition that umbrellas are stuck in the sand upon request only. It is essential to remind everyone that the beach is a public domain - hence, committed as our beaches look with kiosks' umbrellas, John Citizen has every sacrosanct right to plant his umbrella right in their midst.

## **Cirkewwa - an eye-opener for Qala**

The construction of the new docking station and passenger terminal for the Gozo ferry at Cirkewwa is steaming ahead at full throttle and some of its undesirable side-effects are visible to all, especially those taking a dive underwater.

A translucent light blue streak is immediately visible from the edge of the works and extends silently quite some distance away. Divers' associations have been clamouring for the safeguarding of Cirkewwa, a prime diving site, where visibility has been severely reduced due to plumes of fine sediment being sporadically suspended in the water column by weather conditions.

The approach to the Rozi tugboat wreck has also been blighted in terms of visibility. And the question "Was the silt curtain (normally used to mitigate such events) used on site not so effectively deployed?" begs an answer. MEPA is actively monitoring the site but damage has already been wrought as the fine sediment question will take years to be flushed out. As always, developers can never live up to their assurances and guarantees.

The sacrifice of Cirkewwa should spearhead the campaign to oppose even more vehemently the Qala Creek project - at least, the marine section of the project, which entails coastal engineering works, such as the construction of a breakwater for yacht marina purposes. Further tampering with our coastal resources should be prevented.

Please send any pictures or stories to [deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk).

Nature Trust (Malta) is seeking to recruit interested Gozo residents to report on any environmental issues (even taking photos of sites) on our sister island. Anyone interested should write to the same e-mail address.