

Going from bad to worse



An Aleppo pine tree (right, above) along the roadside at Żebbieġh and a carob tree in a remote valley in Birżebbuġa have paid the ultimate price for standing in the way of arsonists. Are they simply clearing the way for more development?

One did not have to wait for the seven environmental NGOs to issue their lamentation about the current situation concerning illegal development and the evident lack of enforcement. The writing has been on the wall for some time now, with those involved in the sector having long perceived the shambles in which the enforcement sector lies.



The laissez-faire attitude was aptly summed up in an article penned by Alfred Baldacchino, a retired senior officer in the Malta Environment and Planning Authority's Environment Directorate and a vociferous environmental campaigner.

Baldacchino wrote: "Not only has the pitiful state of the environment under the previous administration not been addressed, but today, I regret to say, it is worse than it was before. After 18 months, the environment is still in limbo, still hijacked by Mepa."

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Having lost its workaholic director, architect Alex Borg, the Enforcement Directorate remains rudderless, suffering from a chronic lack of manpower and resources to follow up complaints in a timely fashion and, most probably, dogged as ever by political interference.

This is epitomised by the bouncing and non-receipt of planning complaints sent to Mepa over weekends via e-mail, due to its mailbox being full, as if environmental protection ever goes on holiday or lowers its guards.

The roughshod manner in which a former dirt track at Comino (a Natura 2000 site, to boot) was widened and which, allegedly, caught Mepa by 'surprise', is another case in point.

Mepa promptly issued an enforcement notice on the Commissioner of Land, in a farcical situation reminiscent of the 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' parody, since the commissioner falls within the Office of the Prime Minister. One wonders if the commissioner or his staff will make the trip to Comino to reverse the ecological damage wrought by the road widening.

Mepa will find fault with my claim, probably highlighting the enforcement recently conducted to clear the sprawling scrapyards at Birżebbuġa or the illegal billboards that have mushroomed all along our roads. These are all laudable and commendable actions and, most probably, there

are countless cases of 'voluntary compliance', where Mepa persuaded the perpetrators of the illegalities to remove the structures themselves.

But the fact is that illegalities, especially in remote areas and on public land, are abounding and any talk of zero tolerance for illegal development is sounding ever more hollow. This perception is increasingly being backed up by figures, as those recently tabled in Parliament, showing a drastic reduction in inspections conducted by the Lands Department in connection with infringements on public land, show.

Mepa should not only focus on the headline-grabbing cases such as Montekristo, Munchies, scrapyards and billboards but also on the 'small-scale' illegal development such as field rooms, gates, rubble walls exceeding stipulated heights and reclamation of garigue, which is slowly eroding the fabric of Malta's countryside. But to do so, Mepa urgently requires a dedicated and beefed-up team of inspectors.

Arson season

A wave of arson has been reducing remote countryside areas to a cinder over the past few weeks, as the photos accompanying this column show. This wave knows no geographical boundaries, with the affected areas ranging from Żebbiegħ near Mgarr, to Wied Żembaq in Birżebbuġa.

One might try to dismiss such incidents as being caused by the fact that the countryside is currently tinder-dry and that fire is an annual occurrence at this time of the year throughout the Mediterranean. Granted, but I refuse to accept this explanation, for two reasons.

Firstly, due to the collateral damage to trees, including Aleppo pines (as in the case of Żebbiegħ) or carob and fig trees (as at Wied Żembaq), since I am discounting the burnt non-indigenous Eucalyptus and Acacia specimens.

Secondly, there is a specific design behind much of this arson, such as clearing obstacles for future development, which might include anything from the construction of a field room, to widening a dirt track or even the dumping of debris and soil on garigue.

Shedding crocodile tears in Attard

Last month, a well-attended protest by Attard residents was staged to vent the community's opposition to the proposed development of 92 plots (villas and maisonettes, mainly), over a gargantuan 18,000 square metres (equivalent to the size of two-and-a-half football pitches) at the western end of the built-up area of Attard.

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The earmarked site lies partly within the existing development boundaries (courtesy of the 2006 rationalisation scheme) and partly outside the development boundaries (within a Strategic Open Gap, as designated in the Ta' Qali Action Plan), including a proposed road.

Eventually, the Mepa board unanimously threw out the application, but the dust certainly has not settled on the issue and the jury is still out. In fact, the only reason why the board threw out the application was that it did not comply with the revised development boundaries as widened by Cabinet in 2006, but proposed to go even further.

Hence, the board rejected the application and asked proponents to go back to the drawing board and to exclude any Outside Development Zone sites from their application, hinting that, once this is done, the application will simply sail through.

What defies credulity is the rat race by some MPs to piggy-back on environmental bandwagons such as this one, in order to gain brownie points, when they are the ones with least legitimacy to speak out on the issue. For instance, if I was a Nationalist Party exponent (an MP or even local council member), I would feel squeamish, to say the least, to attempt to stand on moral high ground on this issue when a PN government has infamously widened development boundaries in 2006.

No less awkward is the stance of Labour Party exponents, with the then opposition MPs not objecting to the rationalisation proposals, even though PL leader Joseph Muscat had attended the anti-rationalisation protest march organised by NGOs in 2006 and even addressed those present.

Mepa claims that the rationalisation plans can only be reversed by Cabinet. So what is stopping today's administration from doing exactly that? The only ones who can claim some legitimacy and consistency on the issue are those hailing from the Alternattiva Demokratika camp – the rest are simply shedding crocodile tears.

Tara back in Malta

The 36-metre Tara vessel has become somewhat of a flagship or beacon of scientific research at sea, combined with public education about marine issues on land.

The vessel was launched in 2003 by NGO Tara Expeditions, providing a platform for high-level scientific research out at sea. It has partnered up with prestigious entities such as the Prince Albert II Foundation of Monaco, Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, International Union for Conservation of Nature, NASA and universities and research laboratories.

To date, the boat has participated in 10 expeditions, circling the globe during the Tara Oceans expedition between 2009 and 2012. It has also made a stop in Malta and visited the Arctic on more than one occasion.

The current expedition, aptly dubbed Tara Mediterranean, will meander over 16,000 kilometres in the Mediterranean basin, with the primary objective of studying plastic litter in its waters, especially micro-plastics. The latter are considered to be one of the most insidious threats to marine integrity nowadays in view of the ubiquitous presence of plastics in the industrialised world, as they can potentially make their way up the food chain.

The Tara vessel should be making its call in Malta on Friday, and the French embassy is organising a series of marine-themed events for local stakeholders, including scientists and teachers, and the public over the next few days.

More information about the Tara Mediterranean expedition can be obtained from the website below.

<http://oceans.taraexpeditions.org/en/m/about-tara/10-expeditions/tara-mediterranee>

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