

Safeguarding against conflicts of interest



The proposed caravan site at St Thomas Bay is home to a very rare species of ant-cricket that has been recorded there since the 1970s. It is found only in Malta and a few other islands in the central Mediterranean.

Contrary to the exercise conducted in 2006, the upcoming local plan revision will not disclose the identity of applicants, allegedly, according to the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, to abide by the Data Protection Act.

I disagree with this decision, as knowing who is behind a lobby (however small this may be) to extend a building zone is in the public interest (especially where construction magnates of a certain calibre and with a proven political affiliation are involved).

But let's give Mepa the benefit of the doubt for a moment and assume that this stance is motivated by genuine concerns to safeguard people's private identity. Another issue immediately surfaces above the water... will the identity of the architect representing the applicant in question be published?

This is not a moot point and it's not conducive to conducting a witch-hunt against architects, but it's fuelled by the current uncanny situation, whereby an architect – Robert Musumeci – is acting as consultant to the Parliamentary Secretariat for Mepa and, through his private practice, occasionally represents his clients in applying for permits in Outside Development Zone sites.

Despite the architect's assurances that he is not involved in any way in the decision-making process, lingering doubts that he might have a foot on both sides of the fence, with his clients' ODZ plots finding their way in the revised development schemes, are hard to dispel.

One way this can be done is by publishing the names of architects representing applicants vying for ODZ plots to be included in the development zones. There will be those who will counter that such a scheme is easy to circumvent, with some architects possibly channelling applications to others, but I am sure further checks and balances can be introduced to further consolidate the system.

Architect Robert Musumeci is acting as consultant to the Parliamentary Secretariat for Mepa and, through his private practice, occasionally represents his clients in applying for permits in Outside Development Zone sites

Turning Marsalforn into another St Paul's Bay

The recent launch of an international call for expressions of interest for the setting up of a cruise passenger terminal and yacht marina in Gozo, and the Gozo Minister's assertion that "Marsalforn has a huge potential for a yacht marina" are the latest steps in converting Marsalforn into yet another St Paul's Bay.

In fact, the move comes against the background of expanding ribbon coastal development along the western flank of the bay, with a number of catering establishments expanding their encroachment on the public rocky coastline by cluttering it with an increasing number of tables and chairs.

The bay at Marsalforn is still frequented by a considerable number of bathers – ‘delivering’ a yacht marina to the area would invariably discourage the use of the beach for bathing purposes due to the deteriorating water quality.

Despite its brand new promenade, the area of iż-Żewwieqa, by the side of Mgarr Harbour, suffered the same fate at the hands of an expanding yacht marina, with very few Gozitans still venturing to swim in the area.

An appeal to save what really matters

Several readers have sent in hideous photos of trammel nets (parit in Maltese, from Italian parete, which means a wall) being deployed in some of the most iconic diving and snorkelling spots around the Maltese islands, such as Dwejra and Reqqa Point in Gozo and Golden Bay, Għajn Tuffieħa, Munxar and Delimara areas in Malta.

Local legislation stipulates that such nets can be used throughout the year, except in inlets/bays and harbours between February 15 and July 15, presumably so as not to disrupt fish spawning.

While this legislation is not without its merit, it provides loopholes for abuse. Firstly, trammel nets can be deployed literally metres away from the shoreline where no inlet or harbour exists (such as along a coastline that is not indented) throughout the year.

Secondly, as happens frequently at St Thomas Bay, for instance, boats can legally perch themselves just outside bays and harbours during the ‘closed season’ and still land hefty catches without being in breach of the law.

Bays that are not plagued by trammel nets reward snorkellers and divers with a bounty of fish to observe.

For the second year running, I appeal to the authorities to designate the first official snorkelling zone, which would act as a pilot study, by closing off the narrow stretch leading from Golden Bay to Għajn Tuffieħa so as to safeguard snorkellers from vessels of all types (fishing and recreational) and marine life from exploitation. This would simply entail extending the existing swimmers’ zone.

Another positive step would involve revising local fishing legislation so that trammel nets no longer decimate local fish populations, to the detriment of other fish enthusiasts (such as anglers and spinners). This could be done by pushing trammel nets away from all types of coastline, not just bays and harbours, throughout the year.

On a separate but related topic, earlier this month, in what should be an eye-opener for Malta, a diver in Puglia, southern Italy, was fined €4,000 and had his kit confiscated for collecting 150 sea urchins in a single day, when the daily quota for mature sea urchins is 50 (visit www.galatina.it/sub-raccoglie-150-ricci-con-le-bombole-4000-euro-di-multa-e-il-sequestro-dellattrezzatura). Local legislation calls for the ‘regulation’ of sea urchin harvesting, but how this is actually being enforced is anyone’s guess, contrary to what happens in nearby Sicily and Sardinia.