

## The importance of scheduling our coast - Dawret-il Fekruna and Hondoq ir-Rummien



An artist's impression of the eyesore yacht marina planned for Hondoq ir-Rummien with its great allure for a future Labour government

The State of the Environment Report (SoE - 1998) yields some interesting facts about our 190-km-long coastline, such as that as much as 84 per cent of the accessible coastline in Malta and 74 per cent of that in Gozo and Comino are dominated by tourist developments, while industrial activities such as salt production, desalination plants and quarrying took up to eight per cent and 4.5 per cent of the Maltese and Gozitan coastlines respectively.

Such figures are somewhat long in the tooth and refer to 1989, so they are bound to be higher nowadays.

Against such an unhealthy backdrop, it is vitally important that our coastal resources are nurtured as much as possible, through proper scheduling. The need for such scheduling is especially dire at the Xemxija-Mistra area, which has whetted the appetite of developers for some time now.

Some months ago, we learned that British Petroleum (BP) was placing on the market 125,000 square metres of land at Mistra on its former oil tanking site, for a total of Lm1.3 million. The dust seems to have settled on the whole matter, especially since investors were warded off by the uncertainty regarding whether the property could be developed due to a scheduling cordon.

Even before that, environmentalists were shocked by the permit issued to convert the old Coleiro building in the heart of Mistra valley into a restaurant. More recently, the whistle had been blown over the apartment blocks sticking out like sore thumbs at Xemxija Heights, all to no avail, as the brisk construction still proceeds at full throttle and archaeological remains in the area were vandalised.

The spectre of rampant development is once again rearing up its ugly head in the area - this time, more preposterously. A developer had the cheek of appealing to MEPA 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 earmarked as an Area 1 due to its ecological importance, to build two villas overlooking the sea.

Reasons such as that coastal erosion should be prevented as much as possible, excessive excavation of blue clay should be abhorred and the scenic beauty of the area should be safeguarded usually are enough to stop prospective developers from rummaging further in the area yet this seems not to be the case for this particular developer. Our insatiable taste for development will one day lead us to even consider the unthinkable, such as constructing posh villas right in the middle of the Ghajn Tuffieha clay slopes. Harrowing thought, yet possible.

Coastal cliffs harbour unique suites of faunal and floral organisms which are specifically adapted to this type of harsh environment. The Policy Direction of the Structure Plan review embarked upon by MEPA highlights the fact that coastal areas of ecological and/or scientific interest which have not been protected should be safeguarded.

In addition, the objectives of the Coastal Strategy within the same review include ensuring the public access and use of the coast and the protection of coastal habitats and biodiversity.

Even the newly fledged North West Local Plan designs the area as a scheduled one (NWSP 40). Building and scheduling schemes can only be amended by Parliament and not by MEPA. At the time of writing, a decision on the developer's appeal had not yet been taken; it was due to be taken during last Friday's board meeting. Unless there was any political interference and

as long as MEPA stuck to its guns, the appeal lodged by the developer should have been rejected.

MEPA must not rest on its laurels and quote the scheduling of the entire Birzebbuga-Mellieha western cliff system as a feather in its cap, since, due to their inaccessible nature, the scheduling of the cliffs was not such an arduous feat. It is in such hot potatoes as the Dawret-il Fekruna case that MEPA must show some clout and refute all appeals to revoke the scheduling.

That the cheek of Maltese developers is legendary can be seen in the Hondoq ir-Rummien proposals. These include the building of a yacht marina and hotel and resumption of quarrying activities in the area. The entire south-east Gozitan coastline from the Qala quarry right up to Mgarr Harbour is as yet unmarred by any sizeable touristic development and provides an idyllic panorama, especially from Comino at Santa Marija Bay or San Niklaw Bay.

The developer seems to have obtained the blessing of a future Labour government, which had already mooted the proposals in 1998. The MLP promptly declared that, in its infatuation with the project, it will strive to bypass all MEPA procedures and approve the project directly through Parliament.

Such sobering prospects for the future of this picturesque beach, so popular with locals and tourists alike, would spell the end of another Gozitan gem, after last year's scarring of Mgarr ix-Xini.

Quoting the same SoE report, the bathing water at Hondoq ir-Rummien is among the safest around the Maltese Islands - the scenario would somewhat change with yachts and boats spilling their effluent into the translucent waters of the bay. For this reason, Nature Trust (Malta) fully supports all efforts to save the beach, such as the recent petition by Alternattiva Demokratika.

Another sacrosanct truth is that the current extraction of all forms of stone from our quarries is unsustainable to use a euphemism, with over 100 quarries peppering our landscape. The white billowing clouds of dust spewing into the sea from the Qala quarry just about the redoubt is visible from all over Comino. Such facts bear greater weight when considering the recent clamping down on illegal quarrying by Parliamentary Secretary George Pullicino.

Decisive actions must be taken by MEPA, otherwise, its scheduling scheme would become little more than a scrapheap.

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