

A glimpse from the past



The recently-approved extension within the seminary grounds at Tal-Virtù has been slammed by the Mepa auditor. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

The Times archives are a treasure trove, spanning back 80 years and thus offering a unique insight into the way local perceptions and notions concerning various issues have changed over time, if one considers The Times a reflection of contemporary society.

For instance, it transpires that since 1930, the word 'environment' was used over 64,000 times in the newspaper, and is one of the most frequently used word in the archives.

Predictably, the use of this word has increased in recent times. It was used just 61 times between 1930 and 1939, as compared to 1,575 times during 2010 alone. This confirms the ever-increasing interest in green issues.

The word 'environment' before the 1970s was not used with the ecological connotations we attach to it today. Rather, it was used in a generic and vague way.

For instance, the word was first mentioned in The Times news-paper archives on April 3, 1930, when reference was made to rheumatism being caused by a microorganism present in the environment.

Incidentally, the reference appeared in an article praising the attributes of Bovril as a nutritional supplement (that impression is perhaps still ingrained in the local psyche).

Delving into the same archives also reveals how the first mention of a jellyfish bloom in the seas around Malta was over 50 years ago.

In a report appearing in September 1958, government authorities were asked about the causes for the large number of jellyfish afflicting bathers in 1957 and 1958.

Incidentally, commercial interests always manage to read the signs of the times, as the first advert for a local jellyfish cream followed in 1958, soon after news of a jellyfish outbreak started emerging.

Jellyfish stirred similar hysteria in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when jellyfish blooms repeatedly caused waterpolo matches to be abandoned as a number of players were stung during games.

Incredibly, the jellyfish onslaught also prompted two renowned waterpolo teams, Valletta and Sliema, to hold training sessions in Germany and Sicily to avoid the jellyfish-infested waters of our islands.

Several clubs had to cancel a large number of friendly games for the same reason.

A dangerous precedent

Over the years I have gained a reputation for scrutinising in this column applications for developments in Outside Development Zones, among other environmental issues, and I do not usually venture into other planning issues.

So when I first learned that a group of residents of Tal-Virtù, Rabat, had been set up to oppose a permit issued for a development application within the grounds of the Archbishop's Seminary, I was not particularly jolted into action.

The application involves the increase in the existing seminary's floor area by 430 per cent, and includes the construction of 29 new classrooms for a new primary school and the enlargement of the existing secondary school, a dormitory, six laboratories and a new parking area with 67 slots.

Despite the site being within-scheme, and thus subject to development proposals, the way it has been handled by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (Mepa) case officer and deciding board could set a dangerous precedent.

Mepa case officer Development Planning Application (DPA) reports are known for their rigorous and exhaustive approach, distilling for the competent board all the relevant information needed to take as judicious a decision as possible. However, Mepa auditor Joseph Falzon has issued a damning report on the case, noting that such rigour has been conspicuous by its absence.

The auditor slams the very superficial treatment of the planning policies listed by the case officer, and the fact that the application was not referred to the Heritage Advisory Board.

He points out that the DPA report is very weak in its justification for the choice of the site for the development, or the need for the development at all. And he says no attempt was made to assess the traffic impact arising from the proposed expansion.

The auditor specifically refers to the North West local plan's policy on the Seminary Grounds (Policy NWRB 7), which states that, for the approval of such a development the applicant had to demonstrate that "there is a genuine need for the use".

If the auditor's observations are correct, then Mepa should ensure that the proper procedure has been followed in the issue of the permit in question.

Without going into the merits of whether the permit should have been approved or not, the alleged shortcomings on the part of the case officer should be cause for concern for Mepa, which should, eventually, issue the findings of its enquiry in the matter.

Accusations that the residents highlighting these shortcomings are simply detractors of the Church can be considered as hysteria.

I, for one, have the deepest of respect for Church schools such as the Seminary as educational models in this country.

And to say the Mepa auditor is not exactly anti-clerical is an understatement.

Misinformation on the killifish

I wish to correct an article that appeared recently in another newspaper regarding the national fish – the killifish (*Aphanius fasciatus*).

The main thrust of the article was that the population of this fish is diminishing due to the limited number of brackish water habitats available. It also said the fish can no longer be found in Il-Magħluq in Marsascula.

This is incorrect, as was shown by a recent scientific study authorised by Mepa into the killifish population at Marsascula.

The fish species is apparently alive and kicking, although its numbers at Il-Magħluq are not as high as in other localities such as Simar, Salina and, especially, Għadira.

The Il-Magħluq site in Marsascula has a tendency to provoke strong opinions. In fact, for the past 30 years at least, controversy has mired the site, one of the first nature reserves to be designated locally in 1987 as a site of conservation interest.

The site's designation as a nature reserve was vehemently opposed by the hunting lobby, while numerous calls have been made over the years to preserve the site's integrity by controlling the numbers of ducks there.

Such a call was made in 2000 by Vince Falzon, director of the then Environment Protection Department, and these have recently been taken on board by the Marsascula council, which is preventing the feeding of these ducks by members of the public.

Interestingly enough, in 1987 local NGOs, specifically Arbor, had complained to the Planning Authority and EPD about works within the reserve that it considered as detrimental to protected and interesting plant species, including the sea rush, wedge-footed grass and the beaked tassel-pondweed.

As for the implications of a coastal culvert on the killifish populations, there is lack of consensus.

In 1991, while touring the site, then Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment Stanley Zammit had said the blockage of pipes connecting the reserve to the sea was responsible for the death of hundreds of fish at the site.

However, last September Nature Trust said the recent construction of a culvert on site to enhance the connection with the sea was having the same damaging effect.

What is universally acknowledged is the negative impact of nitrate-enriched runoff from surrounding fields into the reserve as a result of the heavy use of fertilisers.

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