

Golf course at Wied Inċita?



Paradise lost – The environmental mayhem at the aptly-named area of Ghar u Casa in Mellicha.

The golf course momentum has not fizzled out completely. Application PA 03643/10 is proposing a grand vision for Wied Inċita at Attard – the transformation of quarries (nos 3 and 12) at Wied Inċita and its surrounding area into an 18-hole golf course, golf club, hotel and 250 multi-ownership units.

Last March, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority deemed the application objectionable in principle and asked the applicant to address the illegalities on site before the quarry restoration and the ancillary development being taken into consideration.

A grand vision of an 18-hole golf course, golf club, hotel and 250 multi-ownership units

- Alan Deidun

Fragmentation of landscape

A recently-released report by the European Environment Agency highlights the fragmentation of Europe's landscapes. The report, accessible from www.eea.europa.eu/publications/landscape-fragmentation-in-europe, makes a comparative assessment of the impetus of activities like road construction and urbanisation throughout Europe and their impact on landscape fragmentation.

According to the report, landscape fragmentation has increased over the past 20 years, despite the expansion of networks like Natura 2000, which offers protection to large swathes of land.

The report raises concerns over the projected increase over the coming years in infrastructural works around the continent, particularly in road construction, and especially along the eastern flanks of Europe. Poland alone represents 40 per cent of the projected increase in the European road infrastructure till 2013, in a windfall unprecedented in Polish history, mainly fuelled by the 2012 European football championships.

The road construction market in central and eastern Europe is projected to increase at the average nominal rate of five per cent in the coming years, at a cost of over €15 billion annually in 2012 and 2013.

In addition, 1, 700 km of new motorways are expected to be built by 2013 in the five new EU member countries: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.

These trends in landscape change threaten many wildlife populations by reducing connectivity among, and increasing isolation within the remaining habitat patches.

In the report, the impact of fragmentation on ecosystems and ecosystem services are divided into three tiers: maintenance and regulation services, including impacts such as species movement, water-related services and erosion prevention; provisional services, including impacts on food and timber production; and cultural services, including impacts on recreational activities.

One of the report's most striking observations is that despite the dramatic cumulative impact of the landscape changes in Europe over the past 20 years, the public does not perceive them to be serious enough to warrant an outcry because they have been staggered at a gradual pace.

Not surprisingly, the section on Malta in the report is quite uncomplimentary, with the islands described as being "highly fragmented", with "roads and urbanisation covering large parts of the main island".

Għar u Casa

Speaking of landscape fragmentation, the photo accompanying this article illustrates the utter shambles the environment at Għar u Casa in Mellieħa is currently in.

A new access road has been bulldozed through the side of the hill, smothering the last vestiges of natural landscape left on site. The hill is strewn with towering apartment blocks and mounds of construction debris – this surely is a showcase of planning as it should not be. The area's name is truly fitting for it is eponymous with 'għarukaža', the Maltese word for an unsightly mess.

Lessons from Aberdeen

The World Congress on Marine Biodiversity remains seared in my memory for two novelties I came across at Aberdeen in Scotland, namely in the sphere of environmental education and the link between science and faith.

In fact, running parallel with the scientific proceedings were numerous hands-on educational sessions between teachers and secondary school students on a wide array of marine-related issues, including the main groups of marine animal species, the major environmental impacts of particular human activities are, and so forth.

Students were literally enthralled and completely engrossed during these sessions which made use of live animals and interactive computer facilities.

It is incredible how the national curriculum of an island nation like ours gives so little importance to the teaching of marine issues to the budding generations, with the result that the sea and the issues revolving around it are still beyond comprehension to the public in general.

A landmark presentation given at the congress was delivered by Robert Sluka from the organisation A Rocha (www.arocha.org/gb-en/index.html), one of the main Christian environmental conservation groups which have sprouted in recent years.

The quirky title of his presentation: 'Christians – opponents or partners in conserving marine biodiversity' tickled the fancy of hordes of other congress participants, who were intrigued by the provocative nature of the title itself.

The scepticism at the start of his talk was palpable in the room, especially since faith-related issues are normally stigmatised at scientific meetings. However, Sluka challenged this outlook, giving an overview of how his marine conservation efforts bore fruit when he framed discussions he had with local communities within the context of faith and the stewardship role that the Bible bestows upon man.

The upshot is that, contrary to the impression given by some people in the local media, it is okay to be both a Christian and a scientist, and the Christian faith is not an impediment to the conservation of biodiversity.

The Catholic Church has long redeemed itself in this area, in the wake of Christendom in general wreaking untold damage to the world's ecosystems (emboldened by a literal interpretation of the Genesis' opening passages), with the Vatican even calling on tourism operators to respect biodiversity.

Slipway case

Although the summer bathing season is now archived I would like to comment on a particular issue which took place last summer in the hope that it is not repeated next year. At the busy St Paul's Bay slipway, a conscientious member of the public noticed that a beach cleaner commissioned by the local council was applying chlorine to the slipway with the aim of killing the algae so as make it not slippery.

The intention may have been noble but the spin-off was the killing of a number of coastal fish that were unlucky enough to be in the way.

The local council resolutely defended its position but next summer it should explore alternatives to avoid negative environmental impacts.