

More fireworks factories?



Is the ongoing revision of policies concerning the siting of fireworks factories going to pave the way for more such factories in picturesque ODZ areas, as this one in Gharb?

Through a fledgling working group on fireworks factories, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority is currently drafting a new policy on such factories, along with another new policy on petrol stations, besides the revision of a clutch of other existing policies. No prizes for guessing that fireworks factories must necessarily be sited in Outside Development Zone areas, as isolated and remote as possible from existing habitations.

However, the construction of such factories has, over the years, raised the ire of many in view of their encroachment on a number of uncommitted sites, usually lying within valleys or on cliffs.

The upsurge in the number of fresh planning applications for the development of such factories has so far been consistently met by a raft of refusals by Mepa, which, in the past three years, has refused five applications for new firework factories, with at least three (one at appeal stage) other applications, for a site in Ghaxaq, Żurrieq and Mellieħa, being hamstrung at the moment.

But there are signs on the wall that the authorities' general intolerance of new fireworks factories in pristine ODZ areas is set to peter out. The most telling sign that this might happen is the fact that MP Michael Falzon, until very recently legal consultant to the Malta Pyrotechnics Association, who has been appointed to chair the Mepa working group on fireworks factories, believes firmly in the expansion of such factories, presumably on 'safety grounds', judging from his past claims on the subject.

Ramblers in the ever-shrinking list of remote places on these islands, as well as farmers working fields in ODZ areas, should be spared yet another onslaught through Mepa's rekindled sense of tolerance towards firework factory construction.

ODZ areas already have to contend with mushrooming development boundaries – they could do without another nail in their coffin.

Fancy a plate of date mussels? No thanks

The photos accompanying this column illustrate the latest exploits of a date mussel harvester in the Fra Ben area at Qawra, whereby entire rock faces are being broken off and hauled away, leaving behind just the hallmarks of date mussel presence – conical boreholes.

According to the grapevine (unfortunately, I have no iron-clad evidence at hand), some restaurants in St Paul's Bay are still offering date mussels on their menus, although the species is strictly protected.

The endangered species is listed in local, regional and European environmental legislation, but it seems it is still being exploited.

In fact, the species is listed in Annex II (List of endangered or threatened species), Annex IV (Species of Community interest in need of strict protection), Schedule V (Species of Community

interest in need of strict protection) and Annex II of the protocol concerning specially protected areas and biological diversity in the Mediterranean Sea (SAP-BIO) falling under the auspices of the Barcelona Convention, the EU's Habitats Directive, Legal Notice 311 of 2006 (Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations) and the Bern Convention (Convention on the conservation of European wildlife and natural habitat), respectively.

The species bores its way through rocks, through the release of a mild acid, leading to a characteristic trace or burrow in the rock known as gastrochaenolites. In fact, the scientific name of the species – *Lithophaga lithophaga* – hails from the Greek words meaning 'stone eater'.

In order to evade detection, those exploiting the bivalve resort to various mechanical means (ranging from a hammer and chisel to pneumatic drills) to gain access to the coveted mollusc, devastating underwater habitats hosting the species. The date mussel is also an extremely slow grower, with 5cm-long individuals estimated to be between 18 and 36 years old – the species' maximum lifespan is reported to exceed 50 years.

Ramblers in the ever-shrinking list of remote places on these islands, as well as farmers working fields in ODZ areas, should be spared yet another onslaught

Date mussel exploitation is reminiscent of a time when a blind eye was turned towards harvesting some of the most vulnerable marine species, with marine turtles being the most prominent example.

If eating marine turtle meat is nowadays considered by many to be an anathema, and rightly so, why shouldn't it be the same for date mussels, which fit the vulnerability bill perfectly?

Crop-based biofuels' fall from grace

On September 11, the European Parliament voted to cap the amount of crop-based biofuels that can be used to reach EU energy targets, but the changes have been criticised for being too limited and not solving the wider problem of market uncertainty.

Under the narrowly agreed changes, food crop-based biofuels should account for no more than six per cent of the 10 per cent target for renewable energy in transport fuels by 2020. The move comes amid fears that food-based biofuels will increase world hunger as land is used to produce wheat, rapeseed and corn for biofuels, instead of to feed people.

The most common biofuels to replace petrol and diesel are bioethanol, made from sugar and cereal crops, and biodiesel, which is normally made using vegetable oils.

The six per cent cap was the subject of extensive wrangling and lobbying within the Parliament. The European Commission had originally proposed five per cent, which was subsequently raised to 5.5 per cent at committee stage before the six per cent agreed on upon.

The watered-down proposal has been strongly criticised by environmental and development NGOs.

"This anaemic compromise means entirely preventable hunger and environmental devastation will continue. A cap on biofuels of six per cent is far above current levels of consumption," said Marc Olivier Herman from Oxfam.

But the result was also slammed by e-Pure, a lobby group representing the bioethanol industry.

"At a time when we need to boost our economy, it is difficult to see why MEPs agree to curtail jobs and investment in a sector that helps Europe to grow the production of clean and sustainable fuels," the group's secretary general, Rob Vierhout, commented.

The EU obligation that 10 per cent of land-transport energy should come from renewable sources by the 2020 dates back to 2008. For a short while, biofuels were hailed in the EU as an all-round good answer to rising transport CO₂ emissions.

But they soon suffered a fall from grace when green groups started to look at the impact of the EU's targets, with fears that biofuels themselves could cause a rise in greenhouse gases as forests in developing countries were cleared to grow the relevant crops.

Parliament recognised the potential problem of land previously used to grow crops for food being converted to grow crops for fuel. But it voted to only account for the carbon emissions from biofuels from 2020.

During the vote, MEPs said advanced biofuels from non-food sources such as seaweed or farm waste should account for at least 2.5 per cent of energy consumption in road and rail transport by 2020.

Green groups agree that sustainable non-food biofuels can be a part of the energy mix but argue that more focus should be put on innovative technologies.