

Resilience finally pays off



Mounds of rubble dumped near the Tal-Ġordan lighthouse, Ghasri, by a contractor engaged to repair the approach road to the lighthouse.



Mepa forced a contractor entrusted to revamp the Ta' Xbiex yacht marina to recover hundreds of tons of rusted chains from the seabed at Ta' Xbiex and Msida.

In this column a fortnight ago I denounced the lackadaisical approach being adopted by the company entrusted with revamping the yacht marina facilities at Ta' Xbiex and Msida. In a bid to cut corners the company was not recovering the hundreds of tons of discarded metal chain, concrete sinkers and nylon rope from the seabed.

Finally, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority exerted the necessary pressure on the contractor involved to recover the submerged waste. Hopefully, Mepa will continue monitoring the area to ensure the company's move is not a smokescreen and that it fully complies with cleaning the entire seabed.

It is gratifying to see that, every so often, this column manages to influence, for the better, the country's environmental authorities.

Contractors – Gozo tourism's nemesis

The accompanying photo shows rubble dumped next to one of the Gozo's major landmarks – Tal-Ġordan lighthouse in Ghasri – by a contractor entrusted with repairing the access road to the lighthouse. Rather than disposing of the debris responsibly, the contractor simply piled it by the side of the road, a stone's throw from the lighthouse.

It seems that utter disregard for the environment is a hallmark of most contractors, with tourism the greatest victim in such cases.

Keeping exotic pets – not a status symbol

The photos of the five-foot-long (1.52-metre) boa constrictor named Skittles that went AWOL and which went viral on social networks provoked many reactions. Many were endeared to the

exotic nature of the reptile. The importation of such an exotic animal was seen as a status symbol rather than a pet. Few mulled the implications of it all.

A renewed urge by some to have exotic pets – in the 1970s walking an alligator in the street in London was seen as fashionable – is fuelling a trade in exotic animals that involves innumerable casualties, with reptiles bearing the biggest brunt of this trade. It is estimated that the reptile pet population in UK homes has spiralled from 700,000 to 850,000 between 2009 and 2010.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to counter trade in protected species has existed since 1975, and has been instrumental in saving some species from the brink of extinction. But there is poor regulation and monitoring of the situation facing species in which trade is permitted or which may be bred in captivity.

Even CITES-related enforcement is not flawless – for example, between 2000 and 2008, the percentage of CITES-listed reptiles caught from the wild and imported in the EU increased by almost 79 per cent.

The numbers make for sobering reading. According to a study published in the last issue of *The Biologist*, it was estimated that between 2006 and 2011, over 4.2 million reptiles were traded in the UK; at least 3.2 million of these are likely to have survived the transit to reach households and just 800,000 of these are likely to be still alive in households.

70%

The percentage of animals that die in the wholesale exotic pet industry

A recent investigation of a major US-based supplier of exotic pets revealed that, out of a total of 26,000 animals, 80 per cent were injured, sick or dead. Approximately 3,500 dead and dying animals, mostly reptiles, were being discarded every week. The supplier's defence was that he was in line with the wholesale pet industry standard of 70 per cent mortality.

Besides the trauma faced by traded animals in the form of capture-stress, cramped conditions, injury and disease, there are other implications that need to be factored, including the possible transmission of animal-human diseases as well as ecological disruption of areas where the exotic animals might be released once the novelty factor wears off for their owners.

The establishment of Bedriaga's frog at Ta' Sarraflu in Gozo is probably a case in point, involving the wilful release of the species at the site by someone irresponsible.

On the subject of snakes and the consequences of releasing pets in the wild, in Florida, the Burmese python, introduced through pet releases, is second only to the indigenous alligator in terms of predatory status.

Owning an exotic pet is not fashionable – it is downright cruel and inhumane.

Update on San Ġwann carob trees case

Following correspondence I have had with Mepa it transpires that the carob trees uprooted at Triq il-Baltiku, San Ġwann, was part of Planning Application PA 119/12 for the construction of a gallery to house electricity cables. The permit conditions included the transplantation of the three carob trees on site to a location as agreed with the local council.

The slapdash manner with which the contractor treated at least one of the trees in question raises questions as to the chances that this tree will survive the transplant.

In case any of these trees do not survive, Mepa is contemplating demanding compensation.

Hopefully this case has taught contractors how to go about transplanting mature trees.

Flying rhinos

As the saying goes, desperate times call for desperate measures, and nowhere more than in South Africa is the axiom so true.

To counter the rapacious demand for rhino ivory, which has already decimated 373 rhinos in South Africa this year alone, the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project has translocated black rhinos by helicopter, one by one, to new protected areas that are less targeted by poachers. Since 2010, the foundation has translocated 100 rhinos in this way.