

Nadur revisited

Lm2 million are needed to save Fort St Elmo from the clutches of oblivion - that was one of the blaring headlines of last week's papers. Besides beacons of Maltese history and culture, such as St Elmo, however, a number of other less well-known but equally important sites are in a precarious situation.

One of them is Ta' Kenuna Tower in Nadur. Although thousands of liri were spent by Maltacom on the restoration of the tower itself and on the garden around it, a makeshift dump has been growing just a stone's throw away from it. Along the road from Victoria to Nadur, one can also clearly observe building rubble which has been dumped over the cliff close to the tower.

I would certainly cringe with revulsion if I were the chairman of Maltacom to see the money spent going down the drain like that. Despite the growing chorus of dissent from locals, MEPA has chosen to shy away from the problem, simply sending enforcement officers on site and stating that enforcement is being effected when in reality dumping is going on unabated. The perpetrators are well known - is this a case of two weights and two measures to favour the well-heeled?

The other scourge of Nadur is the relentless pillage of its heritage houses, being demolished one after the other to make way for new constructions. Strangely, many such constructions disappear in the middle of the night, and an application to rebuild the site is presented shortly after. Those involved in this shady business are influential people, so it feels like fighting a lost battle.

The recent discovery of a purported grain or flour mill, evidence of a possible Bronze Age settlement, should make us realise that probably large treasures are being lost when heritage houses are demolished illegally - treasures which are conveniently hidden from the public gaze.

I have often heard through the grapevine intriguing stories of how all aspects of life in Gozo are managed. I chose to lend little credibility to such stories. However, I am becoming even more convinced that stories of a Gozo in the grip of a general omertà, shady wheelings and dealings and nepotism are closer to the truth than I previously thought.

Many Gozitan environmentalists choose not to voice publicly their perturbation about happenings on the sister island, out of fear of reprisals or retaliation from interested parties.

Fortunately, the island is not only replete with developers bent on building holiday flats and blemishing Gozo's beauty (its only real asset) but also with people determined to save it. I repeat - a fully-fledged MEPA branch should be opened in Gozo, manned with staff from Malta, to avoid them acting - or not acting - out of fear or favour, and to allow immediate enforcement action to be taken and not give the perpetrators ample forewarnings before enforcement officers are sent to Gozo from Floriana.

Scheduling of Wied il-Ghasel, Mosta

The Wied il-Ghasel valley system is the largest in our islands, weaving its way from the Rabat-Dingli area right up to Salina and encompassing a good number of 'tributaries', such as Wied I-Ispanza. In addition, as has been aptly shown by a number of scientific surveys, including a recent one by a University B.Sc. student, the valley system is endowed with a very interesting ecology.

Despite this, in analogy with the other major river system in our islands (i.e. Wied il-Kbir), Wied il-Ghasel has been denuded of its former glory, with quarrying and related activities, drainage seepage and over-development being the main culprits.

Wied il-Ghasel was once a place teeming with wild thyme and natural beauty and people could walk along its length to enjoy a peaceful afternoon.

Today, the ever-mushrooming town of Mosta is threatening to encroach even further on the sides of the valley, especially in the Tal-Qares area where attempts to build more industrial garages have been warded off with difficulty.

Residential areas on the edge of the valley have ballooned, such as Ta' Zokrija, for which a school is in the offing, while areas along Triq il-Missjunarju Malti (close to Mount St Joseph) have been used for the dumping of rubble without anyone batting an eyelid.

In the lower reaches of the valley system, close to the gargantuan quarries, the valley bed bears the full scars of reckless quarrying activities, with discarded rubble being dumped on site and smothering any valley vegetation.

The same location has also borne the brunt of repeated blasting exercises for quarrying purposes which have already wrought damage to the gorge wall (part of which has collapsed) and to the down-trodden Victoria Lines (or what is left of them). The whole stretch from L-Isperanza chapel to St Paul the Hermit cave chapel is highly amenable as an ecotourism site, since it is studded with historic and ecological highlights. For such a project to materialise, it is important that Wied il-Ghasel is added to the list of scheduled valleys.

Many believe that the valley system owes its colourful name to the profusion of bee colonies, for which the heavily-indented valley walls provided a congenial habitat. Although one cannot be so naïve as to actually expect honey to flow in the valley, one can at least expect the same valley to be free from sewage.

However, drainage does sporadically flow in the valley, as testified by a conspicuous pipe on the valley sides in the Tal-Qares area. All these threats ensure that Wied l-Ghasel, once a haven for the rock thrush (merill) can no longer be considered to be the 'Valle del Miele' (as the name of a husbandry enterprise further downstream goes) it once was. Promises that the various valleys in the Mosta area will be safeguarded and outlined in the Central Malta Local Plan should now be acted upon.

Growing momentum to save former hamlets

After the dust cloud kicked up around the desecration witnessed at Bahrija, it was now the turn of yet another hamlet to hog the limelight - Bidnija. In what increasingly appears to be a growing pro-environmental crescendo around the country, Maurice Mizzi chose to include a comment in his latest monthly gardening article in The Sunday Times to the current scourge witnessed at Bidnija - over-development.

His melancholy, expressed as a wish to leave the islands should Bidnija become yet another St Paul's Bay, is emblematic of the current dour frame of mind of most Maltese environmentalists, who feel terribly frustrated at seeing beauty spots around our islands being destroyed.

There is only one way to beat the system - shout and stamp your feet. As a multitude, we will finally be heard. Politicians will finally realise that "papering over the cracks" by planting a few alien species in roundabouts is not environmental awareness, but respecting our open spaces is. Here I thank the many conscientious Maltese who every week inundate me with useful information regarding various ongoing issues.

Is this the scenario we are looking forward to - people with a passion for trekking and rambling (i.e. hiking) seeking to emigrate? Voluntary exile? We painstakingly seek to satiate the land demands needed for so-called pastimes of numerous minorities (the most recent addition are Formula 1 enthusiasts who have earmarked Ta' Qali as their favoured site) while we are unaware that the majority have countryside rambling as their favourite Sunday afternoon activity - with hunters plastering RTO signs all around and developers axing the rest, who will safeguard the future for such a pastime?

Our young generations have been raised in a climate shorn of the respect one should have for the outdoors, being distracted as they are by indoor pastimes, hence the lack of clamour and protest from their side regarding the current loss of open space is well understood.

If only they realise what really is at stake here - a not-so-farfetched future whereby they are compelled to take their children out in designated green lungs only, such as Buskett and San Anton Gardens, since the rest of the countryside has succumbed to the urban jungle.

If only our students and young people took the trouble to write to the newspapers to air their concern on what is, after all, their right to a healthy, open environment!

Sanctionings - time to stem the flow

You might dub it as a cheap stunt but every month I will highlight the number of properties sanctioned by MEPA. This might also be stale news, since you can get such statistics from the MEPA Website; however, I choose to highlight only the sanctioning figures, since this shameful procedure is especially contemptible, in my opinion.

Through sanctioning, what are often illegal developments are given the attire of legality - such a cheap leeway gives a free ride for many developers who first seek to flout the law and then to apply for sanctioning at a later stage.

The MEPA enforcement unit closed 77 enforcement cases in September; 48 cases of these (62.33%) were sanctioned by the issue of a MEPA permit.

Silver linings

Despite my earlier criticism, MEPA should be lauded for its recent publication of a list of protected sites (Government Notice 877 of 2003) as part of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (which will lead to the setting up of a national ecological network of special areas of conservation).

A total of 38 (seven designated as sites of national importance and 31 provisional sites of international importance) sites were cited, spanning over garigue areas (Xaghra tal-Kortin, Nadur), coastal cliffs, woodland remnants (Buskett, Tal-Hazrun), marshland (il-Ballut, Marsaxlokk; Salina, Simar), caves (Wied Harq Hamiem), valley areas (Wied Qirda, Wied il-Mizieb), islets (Il-Gebla tac-Cawla and Il-Gebla tal-Halfa) and sand dunes (White Tower Bay and Ramla l-Hamra).

One suggestion, thanks to hindsight, is that urgent protection measures are needed on some of the most bedraggled sites, such as Xaghra tal-Qortin and White Tower Bay.

Regulations introduce the precautionary principle, that is that projects can only be permitted after studies have ascertained that no adverse effect on the integrity of the site being protected. Projects may still be permitted if there are no alternatives, and there are imperative reasons of overriding public interest in specific circumstances. The onus is now on MEPA to stick verbatim to such tenets and not to override them in its development decisions (to the attention of the DCC!).

Thumbs up also for the recent refusal of an application to build maisonettes in close propinquity to Wied Mejxu in Swieqi.

deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk