

Privatising an entire valley?



The restoration of rubble walls is welcome, as long as they are not intended to block free public access to an entire valley, as is allegedly being done at Wied Babu, Żurrieq.

Wied Babu in Żurrieq is arguably one of the most scenic valleys on the island, meandering from the lower reaches of the village down to the sea, with its steep mouth flanking the iconic Blue Grotto.

The valley bed has long been coveted by visitors hailing from far and wide, largely for a Sunday afternoon ramble or chin-wag with friends. Admittedly, these visitors do not exactly keep the site spotlessly clean, with the usual hallmarks of human presence, including discarded food packaging and the ubiquitous scraps of tissue, peppering the site.

But a Draconian measure, such as blocking off the entire valley, presumably for private use, is swinging the pendulum to the other extreme. Rumour has it that the extensive rebuilding of rubble walls along one side of the valley which provided public access to the site, is motivated by more than just restoration.

Rather, according to the grapevine, the anomalously-high rubble walls being constructed – which rise beyond the prescribed 1.2 metres – are more of a ring fence, cordoning off access to the Wied Babu valley bed, with considerable swathes of the valley lying in the private hands of an eminent developer firm hailing from Kirkop and Żurrieq.



Against this background, it is legitimate to ask some questions: Is it true that most of Wied Babu Valley is now in private hands? If so, what are the future plans for the valley?

Will access to the valley in future only be provided against payment? And will this controlled access be granted only to patrons of a catering or agro-tourism development being constructed at the entrance to the valley?

A number of planning applications refer to different locations flanking the valley – some for the proposed reconstruction of a dilapidated agricultural store, others for the erection of a pump room and other seemingly benign facilities for farmers.

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The real reason why dead tuna are washing ashore

This summer season saw a strange increase in the number of sizeable bluefin tuna washing up dead along different parts of Malta's east coast, from Sliema all the way up to St Paul's Bay.

The cause for this phenomenon is so far unknown, with some speculating that the stranded fish may be originating from the nearby tuna pens – for example, escapees or sick tuna individuals that are freed by the fish-farm operators.

But the real cause could lie elsewhere. There are reports that individuals are fishing for bluefin tuna close to the tuna pens at St Paul's Bay, only to dump their caught tuna, which would have died by then, back into the sea upon seeing the slightest hint of law enforcement approaching them.

Current legislation stipulates that recreational fishermen can only catch one bluefin tuna individual per boat per trip, and that such individuals must weigh at least 30kgs or be at least 115cm long. So many recreational fishermen opt to release any surplus blue fin tuna individuals so as not to be in breach of this legislation.

Fortunately, since the vast majority of recreational fishermen are responsible, this catch-and-release practice often results in a living bluefin tuna individual being let back into the wild. But rumour has it that there is an unscrupulous individual at St Paul's Bay whose despicable behaviour is resulting in a deplorable waste of these majestic creatures. Law enforcement is solicited to investigate this allegation.

Development pressure on ODZ areas is unrelenting

As is often pointed out in this column, while Malta's development boundaries may not have yet been extended, Outside Development Zone (ODZ) areas are nonetheless facing an unrelenting onslaught, not just from the usual suspects, namely the 'big developers', but mainly from many Toms, Dicks and Harrys in this country.

The following is just a few of the deluge of ODZ development applications that have been submitted over the past few weeks, and for which objections can still be filed:

- PA 04608/16 refers to the part-demolition and rebuilding of an existing farmhouse in Żebbiegħ, l/o Mġarr. The new design includes a swimming pool. Such farmhouse reconstructions should be aimed at helping farmers to upgrade their facilities, not at helping people who are not farmers to build residences with pools in the countryside.
- PA 04842/16 refers to the conversion of a group of small rural rooms opposite a recently-upgraded cow farm in Wied Għomor into a residence.
- PA 04959/16 proposes the building of a swimming pool and other internal features at a rehabilitated farmhouse in San Ġwann, close to Wied Għollieqa reserve.
- PA 04975/16 refers to the conversion of an existing farmstead into four separate residential units and the opening of a private road at Ta' Buqana, Rabat.
- PA 04379/16 proposes the sanctioning of a swimming pool and deck area that were illegally added to an pre-1978 building in Baħrija.
- PA 04339/16 starts off with a laudable proposal – the demolition of an illegal building in an ODZ area at St Paul's Bay, only to propose its replacement with two residences, complete with swimming pool, of course.
- PA04629/16 proposes the demolition of rooms existing pre-1967 and the construction of stables, including a storage garage, vet's office and paddock, and the addition of a cesspit and manure clamp at il-Munxar, overseeing St Thomas Bay.

This is just a small sample of the torrent of ODZ applications being submitted each week, which speaks volumes about the environmental credentials of the average Maltese citizen.

Hats off to the numerous volunteers in local environmental NGOs who painstakingly trawl through these planning applications on a weekly basis so as to submit objections to the unrelenting onslaught on the Maltese countryside. This is a thankless job conducted out of the limelight and about which most people are oblivious, but these volunteers are the real unsung heroes to which the population of these islands are heavily indebted.



Dead blue fin tuna have repeatedly washed up on Malta's shores this summer. Rumour has it that they are illegally being caught close to the tuna pens in St Paul's Bay and being dumped in the sea at the slightest hint of law enforcement.