

The green whistleblower



With 84 per cent of Magtab composed of building rubble, the need to rekindle the flagging art or rubble wall building and the more aesthetically pleasant nature of rubble walls, wouldn't it have made more sense to have commissioned the building of rustic rubble walls rather than the emotionless alabaster-white walls in place?

Accolades for the entity with the worst green performance last month must surely go to the Building Industry Consultative Council (BICC), which falls within the Ministry for Infrastructure and Resources, for its slew of absurd statements.

The BICC stated that MEPA should revoke its current policy of allowing free public access to the coastline since the land in question was privately owned. With 84 per cent and 74 per cent of the accessible Maltese and Gozitan coastlines respectively already stifled by tourist developments, how can the BICC state that the remaining pockets should be gobbled up by its members?

Other unhealthy proposals made by the BICC include one that communities should shoulder part of the cost in the protection of scheduled historical property - this comes against the backdrop of the destruction of Capua Palace in Sliema, Carrack stores in Cottonera and 17th century fortifications in St Julian's.

But surely, the icing on the cake is the proposed modest land reclamation study on the Gozitan coast east of Mgarr for a heliport, as if the effort of travelling to Mgarr from the Xewkija heliport is too strenuous for the well-groomed!

All land reclamation schemes in the sea result in copious amounts of turbidity being generated, as with the extension to the Cirkewwa terminal and the deplorable Portomaso yacht marina, with its anomalous milky white sea.

The BICC's unbridled ambitions are a direct result of our unhealthy dependence on the building industry, chief catalyst behind the abnormally high rate of land speculation and development in our country - hence, a complete reshuffle is needed where industry is gradually reformed and eventually downsized.

And to keep to the same hymn sheet, it seems that some individuals have a penchant for wrecking a country's environment. A prominent member of the BICC, Angelo Xuereb of AX Holdings, recently wrote to The Times to attack Lija council for opposing his proposal to build a home for the elderly in Preziosi Street, Lija. Mr Xuereb claimed that only few of the 400-year-old olive trees on site need to be uprooted to be relocated. However, we know what "relocated" means in practice. One need only look at what happened to the "relocated" trees from the Cottonera sports complex site which were left to wither and die at Zabbar.

Mr Xuereb also claims that, through his endeavours, he would be embellishing the approach to Lija through the demolition and replacement of an unsightly wall. He further strives to prove his point by including a deceiving photo in his letter. Surely, by joining forces to oppose the project, Lija residents don't seem overly bothered by the quaint wall Mr Xuereb is referring to.

Apart from the rationale behind these green arguments, surely Mr Xuereb must be overwhelmed by the many people opposing his many controversial projects, namely the Lija home and Verdala golf course. Predictably, however, he appears quiet unruffled.

Another big name in construction, Polidano Brothers, applied for a permit for the development of self-catering apartments for timeshare purposes just 150 metres from the Riviera Hotel in Marfa and lying within the buffer zone of the scheduled redoubt of Ramla tal-Bir. One can only commend the Mellieha council for its vehement opposition to the application and augur that MEPA upholds all its policies.

The L-Ahrax squatters experienced yet another chapter in their history of political patronage when the newly-fledged Armier Developments Ltd was given a carte blanche to develop a staggering 1,575 boathouses over 23 hectares, or roughly a third of the proposed Verdala golf course footprint, from Ramla tal-Qortin to White Tower Bay.

Besides, the government will fork out Lm4 million of taxpayers' money for a project, as if, to add insult to injury, law-breakers are to be subsidised rather than punished. One wonders whether the campaign against tax evasion is really worth the candle seeing that public money is still going down the drain, as at Armier.

In the political camaraderie surrounding the whole case, one also wonders why the Labour Party failed to oppose such a project, since it historically refutes anything coming from the other side - our two major political parties have done it again, reaching consensus not over the European Union but over vote-catching stunts such as this one.

Nature Trust has been calling for a reduction in the number of boathouses from the existing 1,200 to 600.

Also, what will the government do about the illegal squatters at Bahar ic-Caghaq, St Thomas Bay, Gnejna and Dahlet Qorrot? Will the Armier case serve as a precedent with the government not batting an eyelid about these cases too till it is too late? Additional boathouses are already in the offing for Dahlet Qorrot.

October also ushered in a rude awakening for our short-sighted tourist operators. In a report by Deloitte and Touche, it transpired that tourist arrivals for 2002 would be 10 per cent lower than in 2001. Predictably, the Tourism Ministry pinned all the blame on September 11 rather than admitting that the most tourists expect to find alternatives to built-up coastlines and hotels in pristine areas - staying gridlocked in the traffic jam at Victoria for half an hour when Gozo is advertised as a vintage, relaxing destination or finding that our "wildest" areas are being usurped by speculators, as at Hondqoq ir-Rummien, certainly does not help. More active nature conservation and trails are some of the solutions.

With land being at such a premium, Nature Trust (Malta) clamoured during October for the more efficient use of land within industrial estates, especially amid reports that some 30 foreign companies were waiting to be assigned land for their business.

As revealed by the SoE report (2002), almost 30 per cent of land within our industrial estates is as yet undeveloped. So, to mitigate the impact of industry on the rural environs, further development should be targeted at only some of the 14 or so industrial estates in our islands so as to spare further mushrooming of estates in sensitive areas, such as Xewkija, Attard and Safi. At the same time, further development in privately-owned areas, such as at Burmarrad and the Zebbug-Qormi areas, should be strictly monitored.

The hue and cry which was understandably created around the case of Labour MP Anton Refalo regarding his permit breach in a pristine area at Qala lingered on, with MEPA denying that any permit had been issued directly by the Development Control Commission (DCC) to sanction the illegal development.

Citizens expect to see MEPA keep its promise that it is simply gathering information about the matter before acting so that no one, especially an MP, is above the law, as has already happened in the ill-fated former Solemar Hotel (aptly renamed Riviera Hotel) case. To obtain par condicio, the breach through destruction of part of the watercourse at San Blas in Gozo by people with connections to Minister Giovanna Debono should also be rectified.

Despite last Wednesday's downpour, the water prospects for our islands look bleak. Last year, our islands received only 70 per cent of their average annual rainfall.

One wonders if the resolve of golf course advocates is mellowed somewhat in the face of such a high water consumption of golf courses and the looming desert conditions of our islands. Under such dry conditions, increased water pumping from boreholes would simply exacerbate the salinity of our groundwater with disastrous effects.

Silver linings

The ball was finally set rolling in the conservation of the sand dune at White Tower Bay with works, such as the installation of metal bollards and of educational signs, around the perimeter of the dune, proceeding at full throttle as borne out of the cooperation between Nature Trust and MEPA.

Time will provide the best counsel as to whether these measures will serve to stave off would-be campers and car owners from smothering the dune vegetation during the sweltering summer months.

While risking being branded overly optimistic, one only augurs that the White Tower Bay case acts as a beacon for the future conservation of other ecologically sensitive areas, such as the dune at Golden Bay, the marshlands at Salina and Dahlet ix-Xmajjar and tracts of garigue all around our islands.

October also witnessed the welcome refusal by MEPA for the building of a dwelling at San Blas in Gozo, an area frequently hounded by speculators.

For once, the wooden spoon was not reserved for Malta in the environmental field when ST Microelectronics Malta was awarded the prestigious Management Award for Sustainable Development (as part of the European Awards for the Environment 2002), organised by the European Commission.

The wording used by ST Malta in a statement issued soon after such a presentation keeps reverberating in my mind - "caring for the environment is part of the ethical obligations of business".

One wonders if such green acumen is the creed of some notorious quarry operators in our islands while enshrouding the surrounding greenery with a white cloud of dust or peppering our countryside with discarded rubble as a result of their roughshod operations?!

Another laudable local entity is the Housing Authority which, for the second year running, has adopted solar energy measures for all its social housing programmes, hopefully enticing the government to adopt these on a national scale.

October also witnessed our authorities finally pulling up their socks when tackling illegal dumping. Silent vigilance over notorious unofficial dump sites would be dispensed through cameras strategically installed in our countryside, to catch culprits in the act. This comes in the wake of recent despicable incidents, such as the one in which the Birzebbuga council lamented that, after having forked out hefty sums to clean the Ghar Hasan environs, the area was again desecrated that same week, while some months ago a scoundrel was caught red-handed trying to dump a truckload of waste at Delimara by MEPA officials overseeing an onsite clean-up operation!

Also striking is that the south of Malta appears to bear the brunt of illegal dumping, a fact which could have several sociological connotations, such as a regional prevailing mentality that the countryside is a resource to exploit for dumping, the concentration of a large number of quarries in this region or a prevailing conviction that the south has already degraded beyond recuperation.

The annual Clean Up the World Campaign has mushroomed into a gargantuan occasion, with 45 local councils and 5,000 volunteers participating in this year's event. What certainly raises one's eyelids is the staggering figure of 32,000 tons of waste removed from our countryside over the last four years. Despite this, we keep on building our roadside walls and other "frivolous" works from stone which is fresh from the mint!

After these silver linings, one is disappointed to see that the situation at Golden Bay, with an Internet café right in the middle of a sand dune and an illegal flight of steps still in place in flagrant defiance of the authorities are still there. I hear that the matter is now bogged down in legal nit-picking often resorted to by developers to buy time.