

The Green Whistleblower



Despite working to mitigate flooding problems, the installation of overflow pipes by the Works Division in the makeshift dam in the scheduled valley of Wied Ghollieqa were carried out with no consultation whatsoever with the site managers (i.e. Nature Trust), with the consequence that a number of trees, such as a very old holm oak tree, were uprooted, while the roots of others were exposed. When will a modicum of environmental awareness suffice such works?

Although parts of Wied Qirda and the Tal-Bloq area have been declared a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) of local importance due to the number of sumach, terebinth and bay laurel trees found there, numerous infringements within the valley system threaten the ecological integrity of the site.

A case in question is PA 06393/02, granted by MEPA's Reconsideration Board for the sanctioning of an agricultural store, access ramp and rubble wall in an Outside Development Zone (ODZ) site in Wied Qirda, l/o Siggiewi, after the same application was refused twice by MEPA (on April 28, 2003 and on February 5 this year). The case officer gave more than reasonable justifications as to why he was recommending a refusal, such as:

Some of the walls constructed were in fact not rubble walls but franka ones (as evident from some of the accompanying photographs);

Most of the walls constructed exceeded the stipulated height of 1.2 m (even reaching 3.5 m along certain stretches);

The opened paths and tracks pass through a maquis conservation area;

The development is overall intrusive in a Rural Conservation Area, etc.

Despite these more than sufficient reasons, MEPA's Reconsideration Board gave its go-ahead to all of the above, even though they posed a veritable eyesore in the middle of a valley habitat. Not content with having achieved his ends, the applicant decided to start depositing building rubble from a nearby quarry on site in an improvised reclamation exercise, destroying many carob trees in the process.

Nature Trust duly alerted MEPA to what was happening and, after some dilly-dallying (even claiming that they did not know where the site was, despite having state-of-the-art site maps and geographical paraphernalia), visited the site and meted out an enforcement notice to the perpetrator, who had already received an enforcement notice (ECF 305/01). Undaunted by all this, the perpetrator still had the cheek to dump truckloads of material on the site the following day!

The bottom line: MEPA enforcement lacks any clout whatsoever and certainly does not instill any fear or respect of the law in applicants/developers. The track record of applicants should be considered when processing applications - in this case, since the applicant had no qualms about flouting the law, when he applies for a sanctioning of the destruction he has caused (and he will predictably apply), he should be shown the door.

MEPA boards should be consistent in their decision-making - rather than reconsider its decision, MEPA should have compelled the developer to pull down the franka walls, close the access ramp he opened and plant 10 carobs for every one he uprooted or severely 'pruned'.

Thanks to the applicant, the access road into Wied Qirda has had its tarmac worn away, with rocks jutting out of the road surface, with surrounding vegetation shrouded in a cloud of white dust. Concerned visitors to the area have time and again informed the Siggiewi council (under whose jurisdiction the area falls) of the devastation being wrought. The local council, needless to say, failed to take any action.

Nature Trust will continue to monitor the site to ensure that the applicant is brought to heel and that the site is no longer ravaged.

A golf course to embellish Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra

Dr Austin Sammut ("Of golfers and cheap flyers", The Times, last Tuesday) confidently states that a golf course at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra "will embellish the area".

One wonders what led him to such a conclusion - maybe, he was referring to species richness - but surely not, seeing that a golf course is often touted as being a 'biological desert' compared to the garigue habitat.

Dr Sammut's line of reasoning becomes evident later in the article when he states that "they are well looked after and spotlessly clean, attended to by an army of gardeners and cleaners". So that's it - the idiosyncrasy by pro-golfers that golf courses embellish a site is based on their being clean - surely, such a definition of 'embellishment' is rather blinkered and is reminiscent of ongoing roadside and roundabout works.

Dr Sammut should take a page out of Michael Camilleri's letter (The Sunday Times, September 25), in which he writes that "Most of the time these 'embellishments' merely detract from the old-world charm which used to exist before many attractive elements started being soullessly ripped out and replaced by prime examples of red-brick, new-town environment".

In his pro-golf exhortation, Dr Sammut falls, like many sharing his views, into the trap of using unsuitable examples to compare Malta - i.e. Portugal (several hundred times the size of Malta) and Cyprus (30 times Malta) - while providing more food for thought for the anti-golfers when saying that these countries are already peppered with golf courses.

A recent news item which caught my eye is that the Malta Tourism Society is inviting sectors of society to submit statements to show their commitment towards a truly sustainable and responsible tourism industry to seek a consensus on the issue. This is truly a laudable initiative - I wonder what the response from the two main political parties and from the MTA will be, in view of their incessant lobbying for unsustainable golf courses on the island.

After the initial hype about golf courses, now that the hard facts have finally started to trickle through, a growing number of correspondents have joined the anti-golf lobby. Two notable cases include the 'Special Correspondent' (The Sunday Times, September 25), who rightly states that "A golf course would transfer public land for private profit and enjoyment; the loss would be certain, the profit would be most uncertain" and Massimo Farrugia (The Times, September 24) who posed some relevant questions to the MTA (and to which mainly elusive answers were forthcoming).

Gone also are the days when farmers could be elbowed out of the way with little impediment. Manikata farmers are pulling up their socks against the imposed eviction and even venting their anger on newspapers (see "The Dying Fields of Manikata", Joseph Muscat, The Times, last Monday).

The ball is now in the government's court... will it heed the growing anti-golf chorus, or will it trudge on, riding roughshod over the panoply of facts and reasons against the project under the rhapsody of commissioned reports and projected tourist arrival figures? Real meaning should be injected into the "biex int tghix ahjar" (so you can live better) slogan.

Unwarranted attack on Church Commission

I.M. BECK (The Times, September 10) tries to deride the commendable work being undertaken by the Church Green Commission by stating that there must be more important things than 'greenery' upon which the Church should pronounce itself.

May I refer him to what Pope Paul VI had told a UN Conference on the Environment held in Stockholm: "The care of preserving and improving the natural environment... meets needs that are deeply felt among the people of our time". During a visit to UNEP headquarters in Nairobi in 1985, Pope John Paul II beefed this up when stating: "The Church's commitment to the conservation and improvement of our environment is linked to a command of God". And on January 1, 1990 (World Peace Day) he promulgated one of the mother documents of environmental awareness - i.e. "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation", where he expounded that "all Christians in particular realise that their duty towards nature and creation is an essential part of their faith".

All this shows that the Catholic Church is finally making its voice heard on green issues as well. Despite the hundreds of years and all the pains it took to prod the Church into action and all the progress to date, I.M. Beck rather irresponsibly chooses to besmirch the work done so far by the Church's Green Commission. He should also note that the environmental awareness being exhorted so much nowadays has been etched into the Catholic identity for some time now - just think of St Francis of Assisi, with his 'Brother Sun, sister moon'. The bottom line is that environmental stewardship should also form part of one's Catholic faith.

I urge the Church's Green Commission to pursue its valiant stance of issuing an opinion paper on major environmental issues to show that the Church is no parvenu, detached authority but in sync with the needs of today's society. We are all eagerly waiting the Commission's opinion paper on the current golf course fever gripping the country - no doubt, such a paper will be compiled in the most thorough way as has been done so far with other issues.

Car-free-day...much ado about nothing

INCIDENTALLY, this was the same sobering title I used in "Green Whistle-blower" two years ago, yet despite all the goodwill on the part of Minister George Pullicino (who even set up an advisory 'panel' to improve the effectiveness of the car-free stunt), car-free day this year was yet again a sham, with the same volume of cars being observed on our roads.

Most probably, the biggest hurdle being faced by car-free proponents is a powerful business lobby, generally contrary to consigning the car to the garage, even if only for a day, so as not to dampen business prospects. One wonders... in places like Italy, where car-free Sundays feature as much as 10-15 times a year, business must be pretty sluggish!?

Afterthoughts on L-Ahrax campsite

ECF 311/05 has been duly served on the camping site operator at L-Ahrax tal-Mellieha for the perched beach developed on site, with no hint of an impact studies being conducted, and the first attempts at developing a playing field.

This is the perfect case one should use when answering critics (such as Michael Falzon) who claim that NGOs oppose everything - although not against campsites in principle, Nature Trust is against having a campsite which boasts of an eyesore restaurant/shopping centre building, of a proposed playing ground, a car park carved out of garigue and other amenities which ill-blend with the surroundings.

Rather than singing the praises of the campsite on TV publicity, operators should first home in on such misdemeanours, all carried out in the midst of what should be a protected/scheduled area.

The way we Maltese do things is what makes NGOs savvy about most forms of development.

Silver linings

Ta' Qali Trade Fair Grounds application refused - the application to develop a site at Ta' Qali into the new Trade Fair grounds was refused by MEPA on September 15 on the grounds that the massive 135,000 sq metre site was outside a development zone, was not earmarked for a large-retail use (but rather for national interests, such as sports and culture), that it could not be properly accessed and that it was not properly landscaped.

Such an application of MEPA's yardstick, though commendable, should also be applied when it comes to the proposed golf course at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra site, which, as rightly pointed out by Marco Cremona, is ODZ and was never earmarked for a golf course.

Malta opposes use of driftnets - in the EU's Fishing Council, Malta has reiterated its opposition to the use of driftnets in the Mediterranean, in view of the detrimental effect that these have on non-target marine species, such as turtles, dolphins, sharks, etc.