

Even more valleys down degradation lane



Idyllic views of Mgarr Harbour could soon be a thing of the past for some Ghajnsielem residents if some of the absurd building applications there are given the go-ahead - a particular one caters for an increase from seven flats to 22 flats in one block!

Wied Moqbol - this valley in Zurrieq, which over the years has already been subjected to repeated dumping and makeshift landfills, is again in the news with reference to an application (no. 02700/00) to relocate a hardstone quarry from Harh Qim to this valley.

As always, a plethora of valid reasons exist for opposing such a relocation, namely that the development site is close to an Area of Ecological Importance (GN 400/96) and is covered by policies such as RCO1, RCO 11 and RCO 12 and MIN5); a Scheduled Area (Coastal Cliffs) and a Nature Reserve (LN 12/01); that the site lies within the boundaries of a watershed; that a substantial number of mature carob trees and associated biota will be lost to the development; that the area lies within a Rural Conservation Area and outside scheme, with no approval for mineral extraction and that a new service road will have to be constructed and traffic will increase in what is an essentially rural area.

Also, in layman's terms, we already have the hindsight of a quarry being located in the past at Wied Moqbol - this was closed because of the negative impact on local residents - so what's the rationale of opening yet another one on the same site?

This very valid point was aired during the public hearing on the project held at Zurrieq last Monday. From a more holistic point of view, the south of Malta is in dire need of the long overdue Local Plan to alienate further degradation of this part of Malta, frequently the whipping boy of the islands when it comes to environmental issues.

A special thanks goes to Annalise Falzon and Jonathan Henwood for helping in the compilation of this section.

Wied Garnaw - Chickens have finally come home to roost in Malta's environmental scenario with residents sticking to their guns and demanding a say in local decision-making. The application to construct an inorganic waste separation unit and to sanction soil removal and boundary wall height at Wied Garnaw (PA 06268/03) has raised the ire of many Gudja and St Lucija residents in particular.

This valley is already bedraggled as it is, with the same site being subject to enforcement action - ECF 1362/00 after dumping on site was not cleared (such dumping is indicative of the fact that the developer is literally clearing the ground for his application without even been given a carte blanche - he should be compelled to tar down such a boundary wall), illegal (and then sanctioned) additions to chicken farms and other non-rural entities gradually peppering the valley, which is a much cherished green belt by local residents.

Such residents, together with the two local councils, should be lauded for their proactive stance - they even set up an online petition to save the valley: savegarnaw@yahoo.co.uk.

Updates from Gozo and Wied il-Ghasel

Views of idyllic Mgarr Harbour in Gozo for many Ghajnsielem residents are increasingly becoming a luxury, with a number of baffling projects leaving them at a loss for words. In particular, application no. 4989/03 refers to an amended proposal of approved permit, with the new proposal consisting in the construction of 18 flats, a maisonette and terraced house above street level and two levels of garages and stores at Gleneagles Street, Ghajnsielem!

The original permission granted was for basement and seven houses on three floors, later to be changed to two basements and seven-eight levels above street level! This comes hot on the heels of an existing application to build 66 flats in Ghajnsielem.

I am a staunch advocate of high-rise building so as to fight the moray of land use - however, visual impact should be taken into the equation and granting of permits should be based on economic feasibility studies - i.e. is there a need for so many houses/flats in Gozo?

The Dar ix-Xemx (Nadur) saga knows no bounds, as it appears that the applicant has for the third time presented the same development plans for the vintage house (which envisage its demolition) rather than amending his plans as reported on the MEPA Website - "Architect to amend plans for site to be processed as internal developments" after the hearing on the case was again adjourned.

Yet another protracted saga is that referring to the construction of an old people's home on the fringes of Wied il-Ghasel in Mosta (PA 03882/02), whereby the hearing about the case was again deferred with the architect being asked to submit fresh plans within scheme limit.

World Water Day vis-à-vis golf courses

Last Monday was World Water Day and this led me to consider that the proposed golf course at Verdala is projected to consume the combined water needs of Sliema and Siggiewi (using 1995 consumption figures reported in the first State of the Environment Report).

Former Tourism Minister Michael Refalo states (The Sunday Times, March 14): "the anti-golf lobby, without the backing of any scientific, social or economic study, refuses to acknowledge..." He must be joking.

May I remind Dr Refalo of the existence of the Front Economists' Advisory Group, who have drawn up a critique of the Verdala golf course EIA or of the myriad times that Front members have referred to figures quoted by MEPA itself regarding water consumption rates from golf courses abroad or the verbatim quoting by Front members from mother documents, such as State of the Environment Reports or the Structure Plan.

May I also refer him to the sterling letter by Adrian Grima which aptly lists the scientifically-sound reasons as to why the Verdala golf course (the most advanced in terms of the planning process) should be refuted.

Dr Refalo states that he believes that golf courses will attract more visitors - can he provide watertight scientific data, with tangible figures, to back such a statement, as the anti-golf lobby is doing with water consumption rates, etc?

Words don't cook rice

Nothing is more appropriate to introduce the next section as this suave Chinese proverb. MEPA's Green Point (or daily snippet of environmental information on The Times) of March 20 stated: "Did you know that Ramla tat-Torri in Mellieha represents the best sand dune community of the island of Malta and is home to the endemic plant, the Maltese sand broomrape?"

While one fully embraces such an information campaign by MEPA, one needs to delve deeper into the White Tower Bay issue. The sand dune site was previously adopted as an EIPP (Environmental Initiatives in Partnership Programme), with the result that urgent conservation measures were taken on site to buttress the dune against illegal camping and parking.

Last June, on World Environment Day, MEPA announced that a conservation order was to be issued soon for White Tower Bay, a statement which raised hopes that permanent measures would be implemented to safeguard the site.

One year on, while a section of MEPA is strenuously attempting to protect the site, the MEPA board has not yet approved the conservation order for the sand dune site - when will the foot-dragging stop and MEPA work in unison for once? Making statements in The Times and then not substantiating them with facts is surely not the most credible way of moving forward.

The same site was also encompassed under Government Notice 877 of September 26, 2003 as a Special Area of Conservation. The dreaded summer months are relentlessly approaching - are we in for another agonising three months with the dune bearing the brunt of parked cars, camps and trampling feet and volunteers having to continuously call for wardens to visit the site?

Spotlight on radio stations

Everyone acknowledges the power of the media. Messages disseminated by radio stations reach all levels of society, be it at work, in cars, at leisure, etc. Being so infatuated with inflating their listenership, radio stations fail to realise their power and very often, with only few exceptions, they embark on a campaign of alienation, promoting a culture of laissez-faire and nonchalance.

Such 'music' radio stations (since that's what most of them essentially are) would have an unprecedented impact on youngsters and the rising generation by promoting environmentally sound messages from time to time, such as the need to separate and recycle waste, or the need to resort less to cars, of the need to use recycled paper, to limit water usage, to mitigate noise pollution on beaches in the summer months, etc, rather than incessantly promoting party-going, car racing and offroading activities or nauseating commercial spots.

Radio stations have the power to inculcate future generations with sound principles - is the allure of more money from commercial sponsors of such stations to bolster listeners' numbers

too much to imbue hours of programmes with a sprinkling of sound messages?

Let us hope that some radio stations, especially those which appeal most to young listeners, take the cue and positively contribute towards future generations rather than continuously relying solely on catchphrases and on music to entice young people. Only a concerted effort by all radio stations will start turning the tide.

Silver linings

After much hype, the first ever MPA (Marine Protected Area) for the Maltese Islands seems about to become a reality. During a public consultation seminar and stakeholder workshop held on March 16-17, it was announced that a management plan was to be drawn up for the earmarked area - an area off the North West coast, the coast of Rđum Majjiesa and Ras ir-Raheb, straddling over 11 km of coastline (roughly five per cent of the total coastline of the Maltese Islands) encompassing cobble and sandy beaches, boulder scree and cliffs as well as underwater habitats.

Another laudable initiative is the planned collection of end-of-life vehicles and waste used parts, so that all vehicles are transferred to authorised treatment facilities, and that a system of deregistration is set up upon presentation of a certificate of destruction.

Such certificates are to be issued when the last holder of an end-of-life vehicle transfers it, free of charge, to a treatment facility ("free take-back" principle). Such a measure is widely expected to curb illegal scrapyards, the scourge of parts of the Maltese Islands, especially the Birzebbuga area.

A big accolade should be reserved for the Armed Forces personnel who managed to coordinate the confiscation of protected songbirds and reptiles from smugglers after chasing them on a speedboat from Gozo to Malta. Such an act again highlighted the dire need for the introduction of green wardens to emulate the park ranger system in effect in many countries - duties like the monitoring of hunting activities are hardly congenial to a country's armed forces.

Finally, some solace is also provided by the newly-elected Nationalist Party deputy leader, Dr Tonio Borg, who stated that a balance must be struck between development and the environment, especially in view of the limited land resources of our islands and due to the inevitable environmental impact of any development project in the islands.

Such statements come hot on the heels of similar pro-environment comments made by the new prime minister, Dr Lawrence Gonzi, and should now be translated into concrete action, such as through the implementation of all the afforestation projects, garigue parks, MPAs and the introduction of green wardens and the respect of ODZs (Outside Development Zones).

Positive IMAX message

IMAX film operators should be lauded for introducing such an environmentally-slanted film as SOS Planet, during which biodegradable plastic bags were distributed.

Just a small query - who are the local suppliers of such plastic bags? If such bags are indeed 100% biodegradable, I will certainly be the first to spread the word around.