

Djalogi with PM



Green wardens need to be dispatched to rural areas more frequently, as demonstrated by this photo taken at Mtahleb on January 31 (Photo courtesy of Brian Cassar)

"How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?" (Chief Seattle in his speech to 'The Great White Chief' in Washington, who made an offer for a large area of Indian land - quote courtesy of AD Environmental Committee).

On Wednesday, February 22, the umpteenth consultation meeting with the Prime Minister took place, in which the public bore as to how the environmental funds from the EU would be best spent was heard.

Unfortunately, I could not attend the meeting, for which I indeed was raring to go, but I am conversant with the proceedings. The following is just a taste of the coterie of ideas that the PM was regaled with:

- more nature reserves;
- the declaration of national parks;
- the drafting of a definite land ownership map for rambling purposes;
- the safeguard of scheduled houses;
- the need for more ironclad enforcement;
- investment in rural development;
- investment in land reclamation;
- a bigger onus placed on waste separation;
- investment in renewable energy sources;
- a shelter for abandoned animals;
- the need for the NGO regulating legislation;
- the conservation of biodiversity;
- the need to tackle the 'vacant houses' chimera;
- the rehabilitation of the Maghtab site;
- the need to glean rain water;
- preservation of diving sites and the bolstering of artificial reefs;
- a greater emphasis on environmental education; and
- a bolstering of public transport.

Although far from being exhaustive, this list shows a modicum of maturity on behalf of the Maltese public in cherry-picking the most important environmental issues for the country.

The snippet I wish to add is that some of the funds from the EU should be used to fulfill a pledge made 16 years ago in the Structure Plan, as entrenched in policy CZM 3, which states:

"Public access around the coastline immediately adjacent to the sea or at the top of cliffs (including in bays, harbours and creeks) will be secured. This will include taking shorelands into public ownership, Government acquisition of illegal developments and encroachments, and suitable construction works.

"In the few cases where this is not practical (for example where security considerations are paramount), nearby detours will be established. All the coastline will be brought into public ownership within a specified period." Prime candidates for this include Ta' Cenc, Bahrija, Munxar, Fomm ir-Rih, Mtahleb.

The PM certainly gets my thumbs up for such consultations. However, if I may point out the fly in the ointment, while the PM gave his feedback on many of the issues raised during the meeting, such as on land reclamation, he failed to comment on the suggestion made by the Ramblers that funds should be destined for the land ownership map. Is the issue such a hot potato?

Wied Babu mayhem

The time is nigh for local council elections, and hence it is quite comprehensible that some 11th hour political pillorying will take place in all the localities. A case in point is Wied Babu, where the 'need' for a belvedere was actually 'created', without taking into account the environmental ramifications of the deed.

Wied Babu is listed within the EU's NATURA 2000 network (hence, it is a local Special Area of Conservation) in view of its unique ecological features. Such sites fall under the jurisdiction of the EU's Habitat Directive, which stipulates that any developments in such important areas should be subject to an appropriate assessment and that any development should maintain the integrity of the site.

Fortunately, MEPA has finally clamped down on such works due to a "breach of the permit conditions", although how the permit was granted in the first place raises many eyebrows. From the multitude of people thronging the existing walkway down to Wied iz-Zurrieq, one trusts that the need to 'upgrade' (must be a politically appealing term) such a walkway did not exist.

Several of these charades seem to surface from year to year, apparently necessary to justify the employment of so much manpower with the Works Division/Ministry of Infrastructure or so much expenditure by local councils.

Such charades also include the almost paranoid weeding of arterial roads and 'pruning' of trees, and the sprinkling of entire coastal areas at Bahar ic-Caghaq with a pesticide to obliterate a "haxixa hazina".

Environmental NGOs like Nature Trust should be consulted before some impetuous initiative is embarked on. Such NGOs would be the first to commend the same entities for their green foresight if correct procedures are abided by.

Preposterous ODZ applications

The O.D.Z. application mill shows no signs of abating, despite the fresh-from-the-mint State of the Environment Report underpinning the fact that three per cent of all permits are granted in ODZ sites. A few especially galling applications include:

PA 00306/06 - to demolish existing garage and erect semi-basement garages, 15 apartments and 1 penthouse, in an ODZ site located within the boundary of the protected Ta' Hagrah Temples in Mgarr. Nothing is sacred anymore - what about building some apartments close to Stonehenge?

PA 00045/06 - to construct a two-storey house at an ODZ site in Triq Bardan in Sannat. An application was already turned down once. Why does MEPA allow developers to guzzle its resources in this way?

PA 07248/06 - to develop an open storage area for vehicles for repair and a VRT station at a site in Wied Xkora, Siggiewi. Surely there must be more congenial sites than a valley to site a VRT station! Only in Malta does such horseplay occur!

PA 00122/06 - To sanction existing gate and cover it with timber boards at Bahrija, along a path to the west of il-Qlejgha promontory to close off access to a cave settlement. With all the hype on public access in the countryside, will MEPA sanction such a cheeky development or will it duly remove such a gate?

PA 07837/05 - to sanction the erection of electricity poles. MEPA had duly removed these offending poles last November after Enemalta erected them illegally. Will sanctioning now undo the laudable enforcement action in one fell swoop?

PA 06282/05 - referring to a site off Dahlet Pawluzzu, San Lawrenz, Gozo, for the reconstruction of collapsing residential unit and building of a cluster of three new residential units with pools, overlying garages. Only restoration of old buildings should be permitted in ODZ sites.

PA 07194/06 - Site at Tas-Salvatur, limits of Rabat for the construction of a terraced house under the premise that the area is 'committed', even though the area is ODZ and an adjacent application (01320/05) was recently refused.

PA 07233/05 - site at Ta 'Manini', il-Mejda, l/o Kercem, for a tourism development in an ODZ area, which should be subject to an EIA.

I thank Annalise Falzon for her valuable help in compiling this section.

Ta' Kenuna - an update

This column reported on the dump and the storing of heavy machinery near Ta' Kenuna Tower in Nadur (in one of the suggestive parts of Gozo) over two and a half years ago - hold your jaws from dropping, but to date such heavy machinery has not been cleared and the offending contractor is still having a field day.

Can MEPA enlighten readers on this case? If the land in question is private, in view of the high landscape value of the site, can't the contractor be dissuaded from further parking such high-up machinery, trucks, etc., literally a stone's throw away from the picturesque tower?

Grand Hotel resident protest - update

FORTEEN Ghajnsielem residents have filed a judicial protest against the operator of the Grand Hotel in Mgarr, Gozo, on a number of grievances: that the same operator has cut down or severely 'pruned' a number of protected carob trees, without the necessary permits;

that he has usurped a public flight of steps used by Gozitans as a shortcut to the ferry; and infringed Structure Plan policies UCO 6, UCO 10, BEN 1, BEN 2, TRA 4, RDS 7, which relate mostly to urban conservation areas, good neighbourliness, etc.

The same residents have filed a complaint with MEPA's Auditor on the case. A toast to the awakening of the civic sense in Gozo, too.

Attard tree spectres - who is responsible?

After the enlightening letter by John Mary Briffa, officer-in-charge, Arboricultural Section, Environmental Landscapes Consortium, Attard, of February 11 (death of a tree), in which he vociferously denied that the consortium had a hand in the cutting of a tree at Mriehel or the denuding of trees at Attard, one is left in a cul-de-sac as to the real perpetrators of these two misdemeanours.

Does MEPA or the MRAE know who is responsible so that the same deeds are not emulated?

Bahrija court case comes to a head

This article is anomalous in that it is peppered with a number of silver linings, albeit miniscule ones, and in no way is on a par with the panoply of sour news accompanying every week of the year.

Yet another cause to rejoice comes from the Bahrija saga, where Eliza Company Ltd lost out on its attempt to besmirch Mr Portelli, one of the downtrodden farmers from the area, with accusations of assault on Generoso Sammut.

Anyone acquainted with Mr Sammut would be gob-smacked at such accusations, especially since Mr Sammut has quite an unsavoury past, being accused among other things of forgery.

In addition, the police, the farmers and myself are in possession of a good number of highly descriptive photos of Mr Portelli taken soon after the melee that broke out last June.

Such photos couldn't be more explicit in that they show, through the unequivocal bruises on Mr Portelli's face, who that aggrieved party is.

Parole sante - control of redevelopment

For all its worth, some interesting salvos from the last fortnight:

"The Xemxija mudslide must surely be seen as a monument to the breathtaking arrogance of the developer concerned" and "In many ways due to excessive redevelopment without pattern, the island has become ugly and less appealing" - Leonard Jackson, Control of Redevelopment, February 21.

"Is it possible that we don't have enough hotels on the island? Why does the government wash its hands and let it happen over and over with no interest in the well-being of the Maltese?" - Paul Galea, 'Besieged from Within', February 21.

"We only hope that Ta' Qali will remain as it is - a recreational area - and will not be turned into a conglomeration of buildings like the rest of Malta" - Charles Camilleri, 'Ta Qali tent' February 26.

"The paucity of protests and dissenting voices against this arrogant attempt by developers reveals a sickening weariness and lingering doubts whether the effort of protesting is worthwhile" - Lino Bugeja, 'The Ta Qali tent', February 27.

"What else can NGOs do to shake off the lethargy and crass insensitivity of those in the corridors of power to take immediate action to check the illegal misappropriation of public pathways, a birthright of the whole Maltese nation" - Lino Bugeja, 'Long walk... to fields of dreams', February 6.

Silver linings

Wied Dalam waste oils treatment plant - it took some knuckle rapping, but finally there was a reply: Enemalta informed Naure Trust that the waste hydrocarbon treatment facility at Wied Dalam (see attached photo) is to be relocated.

This warrants a sizeable kodus, especially since the waste oil tanks constituted an eyesore on site, besides the health hazard. Environment Minister George Pullicino should be lauded for this initiative.

HSBC's green credentials - this column has reported on HSBC's green credentials myriad times and the latest notch to be added by the bank is the donation of Lm45,000 for the afforestation project at Xrobb l-Ghagin, with the envisaged planting of ca. 15,000 trees and shrubs.

HSBC were at it again at University, helping to plant 1,200 trees at the HSBC garden at University, fulfilling its promise to plant a tree for every new student who opened an account with the bank.

During the consultation meeting with the PM, Minister George Pullicino said new regulations governing them and their constructions should be issued and enforced by the middle of the year in response to a comment that contractors seemed to get away with all sorts of infringements

The Times should be commended for pulling the carpet from beneath the feet of those who glossed over its pro-development stance by taking a stand against the Ta' Cenc project in its editorial of February 22. Especially inspiring was the comment: "Ta' Cenc is one of the few unspoilt open spaces remaining in either of our islands and 'Once lost, it will be lost forever'." Chapeau!

P.S. The last Green Whistle Blower article might have conveyed the wrong message in that Sandro Chetcuti was not present on the Opinjonisti panel out of some commercial interest but as a GRTU representative.

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