

# OPINION&LETTERS

Agricultural fields at Bingemma: Tangibly supporting genuine local farmers is one of the best safeguards against a further penetration of speculators within rural areas.

## ‘L-ahhar bidwi’

When the ‘last farmer’ is gone, the speculators move in

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The interview on TimesTalk with Malcolm Borg, head of the Agriculture Institute at Mcast, is a sobering one, dealing as it does with the predicament facing local farmers and the implications of the haemorrhage in human capacity in the sector.

Borg eloquently describes the labour market openings and alternative uses for agricultural land that farmers are considering as a result of the dire straits in which they find themselves, with the consequence that full-time farmers are fast becoming a rare species locally.

Farmers are well and truly stewards of our fast dwindling countryside. Once the farmers are gone, gone too is the economic buffer against alternative uses of the land, such as construction, making apparent the magnitude of the threat facing our rural areas.

The ‘abandoned agricultural’ or ‘poor agricultural value’ status of ODZ parcels is often latched on to when advocating for the approval of development permits in ODZ areas. When full-time farmers turn their backs on the sector to consider more secure economic returns from the leasing or development of their land or from employment within other sectors (e.g. construction), the alarm bells should well and truly be ringing.

This is especially so when one considers that 60 per cent of all agricultural land on the islands is dedicated to the cultivation of fodder, with such a rain-fed crop often being looked down upon as low-value and few qualms being spared over the development of fodder

patches. Genuine farming with an inherent link to the land is being eroded by individuals posing as part-time farmers and with wads of cash who are taking hold of large tracts of land in former hamlets like Bidnija and Wardija simply as an investment opportunity or to apply for permits for ODZ residential development or agricultural ‘stores’ or ‘rooms’.

Self-sufficiency in food production has long been lost. This does not seem to perturb us unnecessarily, not with the unrelenting flow of produce from adjacent Sicily. It definitely should perturb us, with the recent local shortage of milk being an eye-opener, even if the plight of local farmers might not elicit the sympathy of all.

One hopes that the recently established NGO championing the cause of local farmers will manage, at least partly, to reverse the current sense of dejection prevailing within the agricultural sector.

We can also chip in by shoring up local produce as consumers.

### Camping site action

Ever since its opening at the very extremity of L-Ahrax peninsula, Malta’s only formal camping site to date has been a source of angst for many, given the environmental sensitivity of the context it is set in and its sheer dimensions, which only become evident when viewed from

a height, following its extension in 2010.

Besides the light and noise pollution emanating from the burgeoning camp site, NGOs have reported a spill-over of recreational activities from there onto adjacent areas enclosed within a Natura 2000 site.

The spill-over constituted the development of a makeshift football pitch, with the contiguous area being pockmarked by tyre markings of numerous vehicles, as the photos accompanying this column indicate.

The Planning Authority and ERA have intervened recently on site so as to stave off such a spill-over within habitats of conservation importance. An application for a 4,000-square-metre extension of the camping site further up the road, involving the levelling with gravel of an existing field, is still pending.

### Our Oceans conference

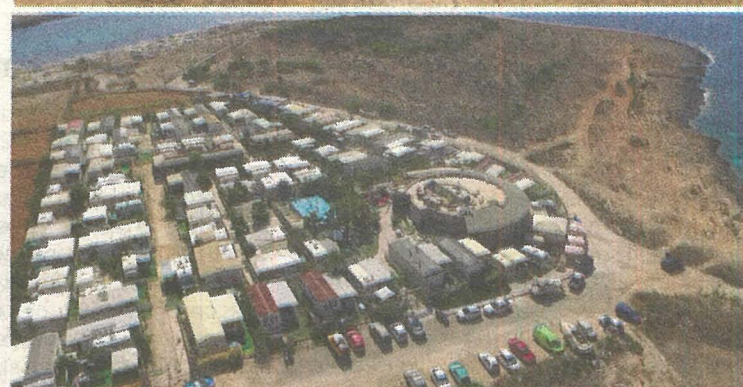
The curtain will be raised tomorrow at the fifth Our Oceans conference, being held this year in Bali, Indonesia, with the tag line being ‘Our ocean, our legacy.’

Indonesia is a highly fitting setting for this landmark conference, with its sprawling 17,000-island strong archipelago rooted firmly within the so-called ‘Coral Triangle’, a swathe of ocean endowed with over 600 species of coral, six of the world’s seven marine turtle species and a staggering diversity of reef fish.

The six themes chosen for this year’s conference are: Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), Climate Change, Sustainable Fisheries, Marine Pollution, Sustainable Blue Economy and Maritime Security.

The Our Oceans conference series is renowned for the sheer magnitude of commitments made by governments and industry alike on issues pertaining to marine conservation in general.

The 2017 run of the conference, held in Malta, will be a tough act to follow given that an



The ERA and the PA have recently intervened to prevent activities at the camping site of L-Ahrax tal-Mellieha from spilling over onto adjacent natural areas, evidence of which is seen in the picture on top.

unprecedented total of 437 tangible and measurable commitments, €7.2 billion in financial pledges and 2.5 million square kilometres of additional Marine Protected Areas were committed, besides the first ever significant

mobilisation of the business sector in ocean conservation.

Further information about the Our Oceans conference can be found at [www.ourocean2018.org](http://www.ourocean2018.org)

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