

## Championing the local plans



Illegal transport of topsoil and dumping of all sorts of refuse at Tar-Radar, Magtab. A report was lodged with MEPA, which claimed that such action has been promptly stalled. Once again, no updates on the case have been forthcoming from MEPA.

Application PA 4286/99 refers to the construction of apartments and garages at Triq it-Tonn, at the only undeveloped site along the entire Xemxija-Qawra stretch. The application was made back in 1999, and although it was refused on March 20, 2000 and again after a reconsideration was requested on June 8, 2000, it is still pending at appeal stage. A hearing was already held on September 14, and a final one is scheduled for November 16.

The appellant even commissioned a report by an archaeologist of his choice to downplay the archaeological value of the site. At the first appeals board meeting, a counter archaeological report, penned by the Integrated Heritage Management Team of MEPA, was tabled. Such a report underscores the fact that the area contains cart ruts and ancient quarries, which merit a Class B designation in terms of Structure Plan policy Arc 2, which states it is very important to preserve such sites, with adequate measures taken to preclude any development.

The report also censures the appellant's report since it looks at these archaeological sites individually, without reference to their landscape setting, and that it refers to an outdated version of the National Protective Inventory when seeking to identify archaeological features on site. MEPA also criticises the appellant's report for describing the rural building located at the eastern side of the earmarked site (dubbed Ta' Tabibuha) as "somewhat featureless", although it falls under the Cultural Heritage Act of 2002 and under LN 160/97 regarding the protection of Rubble Walls and Rural Structures.

It is also claimed that the building is the 'oldest Dejma tower' in the Maltese Islands, besides being a prime example of vernacular architecture. In addition, as underlined by MEPA's cultural heritage report, the applicant's report dismisses the significance of the three World War II defensive beachposts in the site. MEPA's report recommends a refusal of the appeal on the grounds that no cart-rut site is expendable, and that their landscape setting and the buffer zone around them should be safeguarded too.

MEPA's archaeological report should be commended for its analysis, written in defence of our heritage and not to promote a particular planning application.

The site is located within a Level 2 Area of Ecological Importance (AEI) and as an Area of High Landscape Value (AHLV) as per Government Notice GN 400/96 which also affords protection to the cliffs stretching from Tal-Blata to Il-Qala tal-Ghazzelin, St Paul's Bay.

The original application for the area, as submitted in 1999, says the site as 'within/inside scheme'. However, the North West Local Plan, as approved in July 2006 and which supersedes any previous designations, and under which the area in question falls, precludes its development. In fact, map B.2.3 (changes to scheme 6 - St Paul's Bay - within Appendix 2, amendments within settlement areas) in the local plan excludes previous plans for villas and terraced houses at Triq it-Tonn, and sanctions only the realignment and development of an access road, which should not be used as a pretext for further development.

Such a protection measure should be strictly adhered to, especially since local plans have been cited on numerous occasions to justify development in other areas. Hence, it is only fair to

expect local plans to be resorted to when it comes to refusing development.

## Allergic to positive moves

Some individuals and entities seem to spend the whole time condemning and criticising, without deigning to praise and commend when they should do so. Two cases in point are the recent revocation of the Ramla Ulysses Lodge permit and the opinion paper concerning local limited resources by the Church Environment Commission.

As to the former, the import of the decision took some time to sink in, as the revocation of the permit for a major tourist project is quite unusual. While the revocation was not motivated by environmental concerns but on land ownership issues, anyone who is green at heart should have praised the decision.

A good decision should be given credit, and should be judged on its own merits. To their credit, most environmental NGOs did commend the revocation, but with a major reservation - that other preposterous proposals, as those regarding Hondoq ir-Rummien and Ta' Cenc, are also turned down. It does not take one (or a few) good decisions to appease the thirst for an unhindered natural environment and social justice in this country.

The Maltese Church's condemnation of illegal hunting can be term as historic indeed. In fact, its image over the years has been that of a silent, indirect supporter of hunting. For the Church to pronounce itself over the illegal hunting issue as such a sensitive time is nothing short of sensational.

Besides the expected accolades, however, this pronouncement also attracted detractors, who 'advised' the Church to stick to religious matters as it is 'grossly misinformed' on hunting issues and decried the Church's late conversion to green principles and the difference between the Maltese and Gozitan ecclesiastical authorities' stand on such issues.

Though the Gozo diocese lacks an analogous environmental commission, one should not, for this reason, shoot down every single positive initiative taken by the Maltese Church commission. It is only through the sustained effort of this commission and the sustained call of NGOs and the public that the Gozo Curia will finally take a stand.

One only hopes that the Church Environment Commission sticks to the task it has set for itself - raising local environmental awareness within the ambit of Catholic teaching so as to foster conscientious citizens, and not be daunted by destructive criticism.

## Wied Rini, Bahrija

Malta has expressed its commitment to halt biodiversity loss by 2010, a campaign spearheaded by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). Despite this, biodiversity is being destroyed in remote parts of the islands, without anyone batting an eyelid.

A case in point is Wied Rini, Bahrija. Back in 1986, in *The Central Mediterranean Naturalist* (Volume 1, Part 4), Michael Briffa and Edwin Lanfranco had underscored the ecological importance of the garigue found at Wied Rini in their paper titled "The macrofungi of the Maltese Islands: additions and notes".

In fact, the authors had recorded from the garigue on site at least nine different fungal species, including *Lactarius sanguifolius* (faqqiegh tad-demmm). The site's ecological importance also emerges from the floral species recorded there - namely, the garigue is the only site on Malta for *Cistus monspeliensis* (*Cistu abjad*) and is also endowed with other rare plants such as *Cistus creticus* (*Cistu roza*), *Allium amethystinum*, *Catananche lutea* and *Ophrys apifera*.

Yet despite the site's obvious ecological importance, someone decided to bulldoze over part of the garigue to reclaim it for agricultural purposes, doing away with traditional farmers' wisdom which generally respected natural areas such as garigue.

MEPA has been repeatedly alerted to the site - the ball is now in its court to finally protect the area for future generations.

(I acknowledge the help of local botanist Timothy Tabone in compiling this piece).

## Need for more petrol stations

IN view of the controversial approval of the new petrol station at Ta' Buqana, l/o Attard, some have questioned the need for more petrol stations.

There are 83 licensed petrol stations operating on our islands, or one for every 3.8 sq km - a rate which is probably higher than that of any other nation. One might argue that the number of petrol stations should be seen in proportion with the number of vehicles. With about 275,000 vehicles on the island, this works out at 3,313 vehicles per petrol station. Since the average motorist visits a petrol station once a week, one ends up with an average of 473 vehicles visiting every local petrol station every day or almost 30 cars per petrol station per hour (not counting the eight hours one normally requires to sleep).

When one considers that each station has at least four different pumps, the number is certainly prohibitive since it works out at seven vehicles/pump/hour, or roughly a vehicle every nine minutes. While such figures are neat, one has to contend with the randomness factor - many motorists normally fill up their tanks during 'peak' popular hours (8 a.m. to 6 p.m.). In addition, not all fuel stations have the same number of visitors.

However, the bottom line is that the number of fuel stations in Malta is adequate to meet local demand and that, while the relocation of the petrol station in St Anne Street, Floriana, is to be endorsed, it would have been better had the relocation meant a closure of premises with compensation, to avoid despoiling yet another unspoilt site.

It is precisely on such occasions that a public 'environmental contingency fund' would come in useful, rather than the quid pro quo principle applied by MEPA, which is normally applied to a loss of natural habitat, rather than to the loss of petrol station operations.

In an annual assessment of 26 European markets, DataMonitor reports that the only West European countries not to experience a decline in the number of petrol stations were Finland, Spain, Portugal and Greece. In countries where a decline was reported, most notably Denmark, the UK, Ireland and Belgium, the report states the remaining petrol stations worked harder to keep up with demand and also became more efficient.

If these countries managed to cope with such drastic declines (as high as 7.5 per cent in Denmark's case), why couldn't the closing down of a single fuel station in Malta be contemplated? Do we have to have a fuel station at our doorstep?

## **Silver linings**

Upsurge in tree-planting - every cloud has its silver lining and the tree-cutting spate at Mellieha in which almost 3,000 trees were damaged or even destroyed at the Foresta 2000 site pumped new momentum in the 34U campaign. In fact, the campaign will reach its climax next weekend, when at least 10,000 indigenous trees will be planted at the site in Mellieha.

[alpra1@mail.global.net.mt](mailto:alpra1@mail.global.net.mt); [alan.deidun@um.edu.mt](mailto:alan.deidun@um.edu.mt)