

Garigue down the drain



This site in Mġarr was first reported to Mepa in 2007 but trucks and building rubble still encroach on garigue.

A number of disparate but commendable initiatives have been embarked upon by different local entities to commemorate 2010 as the UN's International Year for Biodiversity.

These include talks to scout members and the general public by staff from the Malta Environment and Planning Authority as well as a tourism and biodiversity fair organised by the Malta Tourism Authority to coincide with World Tourism Day, which will be held in two weeks' time at the Natural History Museum.

These are laudable initiatives but they pale into insignificance in the face of the ongoing scourge of biodiversity being perpetuated all over Malta, away from the headlines.

Take the much-maligned garigue habitat during the dry season – the perception of barrenness at this time of year might be a reason why it is subjected to such an onslaught.

The list of locations around Malta witnessing garigue degradation is endless – Limbordin, Wardija, Tal-Palma in Mġarr, Baħrija, Għadira, below the Foresta 2000 site, at Ta'Brolli in Birżebbuġa, Dingli Cliffs. The list goes on.

Common denominators unite all these cases: the dumping of construction debris or aggregate on the garigue in order to 'reclaim' it for other purposes; and although they normally lie in the much-clichéd outside development zone (ODZ) areas, the cases do not make the headlines as they do not constitute new construction, which typically raises the heckles of many environmentalists.

Hence, while efforts to raise awareness in the younger generation about the bounty of local biodiversity are finally picking up, acres of garigue rich in indigenous species are being smothered under tons of debris every day, without anyone batting an eyelid.

Mepa is partly to blame for this as the constant updates it dispatches to the media concerning its enforcement activities normally only feature room demolitions, rarely featuring enforcement action taken by the authority's environmental arm.

I don't completely blame Mepa, as local readers' attention might not be all that attracted by headlines such as 'Mepa halts degradation of garigue'; 'Mepa demolishes illegal rooms' is much more striking.

The rub is that there is no effective reinstatement of garigue. For instance, a year ago Mepa embarked on enforcement action at Limbordin, a stone's throw away from Miżieb, for the illegal dumping of gravel on garigue to create a drive-in.

The gravel was duly removed and Mepa could claim that another enforcement action had been completed.

But what about the environmental cost of the garigue degradation? Who will pay for the reinstatement of the habitat? Driving past the site last week, I observed how the area is still in a shambles, as the accompanying photo illustrates, and it has effectively become a fully-fledged drive-in.

Letting the perpetrator off the hook after he removed the gravel he ruthlessly dumped on the garigue runs contrary to the biodiversity lost as a result of his indiscriminate action.

Our environmental laws and courts are ill-prepared to tackle this growing phenomenon – that of individuals purchasing the last swathes of pristine garigue, cordoning them off with a wall and manicuring the garigue patch to fit their purposes.

The latest craze seems to be moulding ODZ patches so as to accommodate small-scale fenkati or barbecues – the fact that the guests might be trampling on some rare orchid while gulping down their food does not even cross the antechamber of their brains.

History repeats itself too often – as happened with the International Year for Ecotourism in 2002, this year will soon be gone, and with it the fickle renewed interest in biodiversity we have managed to rekindle in a few Maltese.

Urbanisation of Wied Ghajn Żejtuna?

Many would be tempted to erroneously conclude that Wied Ghajn Żejtuna in Mellieħa has been spared the ravages of further development as a result of its scheduling in October 2009. Few know that the residents' lobby group is still keeping its eyes open for development in the area, and for good reason.

Currently, an application for the development of 13 semi-detached bungalows on land verging on the scheduled watercourse area is in abeyance, with the residents' group expecting it soon to reach the formal hearing stage. The area is designated as a "low density predominantly bungalow area", and any large-scale, cluttered development (as three of the bungalows in the original application were deemed to be) would certainly jar with the general landscape of the area.

The valley has already borne the brunt of two previous re-zonings, which are actually euphemisms for change of use of the land in question. The residents' lobby rightly expects fresh drawings to be submitted by the developer to respect the low-development character of the area, rather than sentencing the valley to a slow conversion into an urbanised valley, as happened to Wied il-Madonna running through the heart of Mellieħa.

An environmental impact assessment of the proposed developmental, with a subsequent public hearing, is also in order.

Success is possible

Calls by this column to rectify the illegality at Burmarrad by removing the unsightly trucks and lorries perennially parked in an illegal public parking area were promptly taken up by enforcement officials who duly cleared the site in question the following day.

It might be a small victory, certainly nothing to celebrate, but it just goes to show how even the proverbial man in the street can call for illegalities to be removed and be heard.

Despite the cynicism out there, some enforcement officials do their job.

Jellyfish reporting

The popular Spot the Jellyfish campaign has surpassed the 320 sightings mark and will extend beyond the summer months. A detailed report featuring all jellyfish species recorded will be published at the end of summer.

Sightings can be reported in various ways: through e-mail: ioimoc@um.edu.mt, SMS: 7922 2278, or through the website www.ioikids.net/jellyfish, which includes updated statistics on jellyfish sightings in Maltese coastal waters, as well as interesting snippets of information on jellyfish species.

The initiative has proved to be so successful that it has gained international recognition as a sterling citizen science initiative.