

Is the country finally waking up?



Creating more inroads in farmland is exacerbating soil erosion through vehicular access and field rooms may one day well be turned into plush villas.

Jolted out of its summer torpor, the country awakened in August to a fusillade of pro-environmental tirades from some major exponents. Don't let your imagination, or optimism, run too far, however, since such contributions failed to address the real preoccupations of the green sector in this country - land use and wanton urbanisation.

No, nothing like the statements made by Monaco's Prince Albert, but more parochialism in the form of concern over the cleanliness of the country and, on the more intrepid side, concern over the state of Fort St Elmo as expressed by President Guido de Marco himself.

Not that such interventions are not positive for the country; rather, they are failing to hit the nail on the head by not highlighting the real problems - the loss of natural beauty spots and wilderness.

Environmentalists, or rather concerned citizens (since the former word has some derisory connotations for some Maltese), long for the same attention reserved to the tourist industry.

It would be good to see the support expressed by the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association for the statements made by Frank Salt, chairman of the Malta Tourism Authority's Planning and Product Directorate, also shown for tackling the land use problem.

It's like reinventing the wheel. A leading exponent in this country starts the plot with the outcry that our tourism is being threatened, others join in and you have some flustered minister, this time, Ninu Zammit, buckling and saying that a maintenance squad will be set up, mainly dealing with the cleanliness of public places.

All this is reminiscent of some typical radio programme on the environment whereby callers complain on the poor hygiene and cleanliness on our roads - is that just what the 'environment' is all about, hygiene and cleanliness?

Our love for the environment is skin deep, as is our aptitude to address problems. Once we find ourselves in financial straits, we turn to our goose to lay more tourism golden eggs, failing to realise that more tourist arrivals are not desirable. What about carrying capacities? At 1.2 million tourists a year, we have the highest tourist density in the world.

Besides, we are breaking our 'golden eggs' if we continue to ruin our last remaining beauty spots, such as Gozo - turning it into one large holiday village, with tourist flats and farmhouses for rental purposes becoming the order of the day.

Works Division

To my mind, it would make more sense to retrain some of the 3,800 employees on the books of the Works Division as, for example, environmental wardens and custodians for historic sites, since the Museums Department is completely drained of human resources, rather than using them for cosmetic roadside improvements.

Meting out tougher fines on those caught littering is a good move, as was the decision to impose tougher fines on those caught shooting protected bird species.

What about extending the same laudable initiative to those guilty of applying for sanctioning of their illegal building development or for those applying for a permit within a green area (Outside Development Zone). Predictably, this will take more than a simple rapping to get results, due to the mettle of those normally involved in such cases.

Roads and scooters

According to Eurostat figures (2000), Malta has the highest density of roads per square km - i.e. a staggering 7,158 km of roads per square kilometre. We are head and shoulders above all EU member and accession countries.

Belgium, the second on the list, is way behind with its 4,744 km per square km. Yet the Maltese government has applied for EU funds to construct even more roads, turning the country into one veritable asphalt jungle. How much more agricultural land needs to be sacrificed to such projects before we close the lid on such extravaganzas?

Some people do distinguish themselves for their acumen. A shining example is the director of the Traffic Management Directorate, Audrey Testaferata de Noto, who stated on June 14 that the building of new roads is not the solution to the growing traffic problem as it would encourage further traffic growth.

The wooden spoon is also surely reserved for Malta considering the depressing Eurostat figures on the number of vehicles on our roads. With 484 passenger vehicles per square km, our country has the highest density of such vehicles in the Mediterranean.

MEPA forecasts that vehicles will total 290,000 by 2020. It also states, in its daily Green Point spot, that there are some 500 passenger cars per 1,000 inhabitants in the EU. The figure for Malta is much higher and verges on the 700 mark. Yet, we still persist in offering cars as the most attractive prize for lotteries, perpetuating the image of a car as a status symbol.

But how do we take the bull by its horns? Simple. We avoid the bull altogether. When presented with the environment-friendly alternative of electric scooters, our authorities, namely the ADT (Awtorità Dwar it-Trasport) and the police, intervene and grind everything to a halt.

The police stated that Regulation 18 of legal notice 128 of 1994 lays down that "no motorised vehicle can be driven on the road without a licence issued by the Malta Transport Authority".

Also, section 15 of chapter 65 of the laws governing traffic says that "anyone driving a motor car, electric or other vehicle without a driving licence, or an unlicensed vehicle, would be committing an offence". It is rumoured that scooters would need to be tested by a foreign lab before their introduction in Malta and that a zero-rated licensing system will be imposed on their importation.

Will red tape still allow for such an environment-friendly and parking-wise alternative to become a reality on our roads?

After all, as rightly pointed out by George Debono, in advanced countries like Denmark and Holland, cyclists and moped drivers enjoy full rights as legitimate road users; they have a privileged status on the road at intersections, or where there is no cycle path. And God help any motorist who knocks down a cyclist.

More shame from the hot spots - Bidnija and Mellieha

Shocking as it may seem, the development of a bungalow right in the middle of the valley leading down to Ghajn Zejtuna shown in the photo on right is condoned by MEPA as an infill since planning permission has been granted to three bungalows surrounding the site itself.

Other justifications for siting a bungalow within a valley is that the proposed building will be adjacent to an existing bungalow, that the dwelling will not be visible at road level and that the site lies within the Mellieha building scheme which is zoned for bungalows.

The latter fact - that Malta actually has sites zoned for bungalows - leaves me quiet slack-jawed. With all the palaver about us having one of the highest population densities and a lack of available building land in our islands and similar high-sounding arguments, one would have expected our authorities to apply the brakes on land-squandering bungalow development.

And to cap it all there are a number of bungalow zones around our islands, located in scenic spots. Bungalows come with different constraints, mainly that they must have a minimum site coverage of one tumolo.

Also galling is the fact that here we are presented with a *fait accompli*. The development of the first bungalow in the valley at Ghajn Zejtuna has paved the way for the development of other bungalows.

Can anyone blame those clamouring against development in pristine sites? The first bungalow does the trick for following bungalows whose development is then justified, and arguments that we need to value our land resources more, that development in valleys should be curbed due to flooding problems, etc., fall by the wayside.

Few sites in Malta can boast the same rate of senseless development as witnessed at Ghajn Zejtuna, fuelled by a rat-race to grab a property with a view of Mellieha Bay.

The acumen shown by our planners in earmarking the disused quarries at Ta' Masrija for development fizzles away in the face of the permit granted for the first phase of the Tas-Sellum Village in Mellieha.

This involves the construction of five blocks of flats added to the eyesore development which has been allowed to sprawl all along the heights around the parish church. What the site along Marfa Road certainly does not need is more flats smothering the rocky plateaus, caves and clayey soil.

Bidnija is currently being moulded into yet another Xemxija and Burmarrad, with the usual ploys resorted to by developers.

The former hamlet is teeming with various infringements and subsequent sanctionings. The most notable of these include the development of a bungalow high up on the ridge above Burmarrad, whereby the developer, in contravention of the permit which was granted to him (PA 5501/01), excavated a reservoir, used heavy machinery and even removed rubble walls, all without permit.

You know the ending to all this. After an enforcement notice was issued on site, the developer has now applied for a sanctioning of these latest works (PA 2573/03).

The endless saga of infringements, enforcements and sanctionings is playing in the hands of developers who run riot and usually end up with their permit being granted.

Just a small distance up the Bugibba bypass, we witness yet another farce. The initial excavation works carried out on the ramp and proposed access on arterial road, gate and boundary walls were sanctioned (PA5221/02).

This resulted in the opening of yet another inroad, leading the way to further disturbance of the area, through vehicular access, in the future.

The fact that while full-time farmers are steadily on the decrease in this country, yet the number of applications for farming-related development, such as extensions, building of field rooms, etc., shows no sign of waning provides some good food for thought.

The 'farmer' nomenclature is indeed convenient when it comes to applying for a building permit. Our planners should learn how to distinguish between the genuine farmers and the bogus ones in search of short-cuts within the planning system.