

Protecting Gozitan valleys



The development of a new road at Ghadira could result in some hotels in the area gaining direct access to their own private section of the beach when the main coast road is closed off.

Gozitan valleys, unlike their Maltese counterparts, have largely not borne the brunt of urbanisation and been spared development. However, a particular Gozitan valley skirting Borg Ħarib Street and Smirat Street in Ghajnsielem, seems to have set an unenviable precedent in Gozo.

The long-winded history of the development in question starts with application PA 03603/03 to build a dwelling and underlying garages in these streets. The development application was initially refused but was then given the green light on condition that no access from the lower level is approved.

However, a makeshift concrete platform/ramp encroaching the valley was subsequently erected, composed of building debris and concrete, presumably to allow access to vehicles and heavy machinery needed on the construction site.

The site is now subject to enforcement action and has been referred for direct action since the 'temporary' concrete ramp is still standing, acting as a de facto access route to the dwelling. Besides protruding into the valley it also obstructs views of the historical archway under the bridge in the valley.

PA 05431/05, which was submitted in response to the enforcement notice, to sanction the 'road works carried out urgently', was refused. The Lands Department is now on site tearing up part of the illegally widened secondary road.

Ironically, it seems it was widened at the behest of the Gozo Ministry's projects and development department. One wonders why a public entity in Gozo used taxpayers' money for this purpose.

Was the illegally widened road serving any other purpose other than providing access to the dwelling abutting on the valley?

Waste as a resource

A revolutionary change has taken place in the perception of waste in Malta, according to recent statistics issued by Wasteserv, that indicate that many are starting to view waste as a resource. In fact:

- From 2005 to September 2008, about 10 tons of waste was deposited at bring-in sites, with paper being the most disposed-of material;
- There was a 26 per cent increase in the amount deposited at bring-in sites from 2005 to 2006, and another 25 per cent increase from 2006 to 2007;
- In the first nine months of 2008, Wasteserv has already registered higher quantities of waste deposited at bring-in sites than for the whole of 2007;
- A total of 103,991 vehicles visited the three civic amenity sites at Hal Far, Magħtab and Mrieħel over the period 2006-2008; A fourth civic amenity site is being opened in Luqa.

- A staggering 19,000 tons of waste was deposited at the three civic amenity sites over the same period, with Mrieħel being by far the most frequented site.

Against this background, it may be wise for local schools to organise screenings of WALL-E. This recently released computer-animated science-fiction film depicts Earth in a not-so-distant future being overrun by toxic waste, prompting humans to opt for a suspended existence in space on board lavish starliners, while run-down Earth is rehabilitated by WALL-E (Waste Allocation Load Lifter - Earth-class) robots.

A doomsday scenario perhaps, but certainly food for thought. A parting line from the film's soundtrack Down to Earth by Peter Gabriel asks 'Did you feel you were tricked by the future you picked?'

Mediterranean research

Two local researchers have actively contributed to the publication Maritime traffic effects on biodiversity in the Mediterranean Sea: Review of impacts, priority areas and mitigation measures, recently issued by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (formerly, the World Conservation Union) to add to its extensive free online library. The publication is especially relevant to our islands.

Joseph Borg from the University of Malta's Department of Biology, was one of the authors of the first chapter 'Biodiversity impacts of ship movement, noise, grounding and anchoring', which addresses several topical issues. In particular, it is a valuable source of information on the impact that noise coming from ships on marine mammals, on the impacts of anchoring, abrasion by ship hulls, scarring by propellers, direct mortality of sea turtles and other marine fauna through collisions with seacraft and the impact of anti-fouling paints used to prevent the growth on ship hulls of organisms such as barnacles.

Charles Galdies, from the local Met. Office, contributed to the second chapter - 'Status of marine protected areas in the Mediterranean Sea', which was a joint exercise between the IUCN, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Mediterranean Protected Areas Network (Medpan) based on a survey of all Mediterranean marine protected areas (MPAs).

One of the key findings of the report was that the Convention on Biological Diversity target of protecting 10 per cent of the world's oceans is unlikely to be met in the Mediterranean Sea, where just two per cent of the marine area is actually protected, of which just 0.01 per cent is under a strict 'no-take' regime.

Other findings were that the MPAs are not very representative of the Mediterranean basin, as most of them are concentrated along the northern shores, and that there are few links between adjacent MPAs, with most being separated by distances of 20 km or more.

Malta has just two designated MPAs to date - at Rdum Majjiesa and at Dwejra - with the former being recognised as a Site of Community Importance (SCI) by the European Commission.

Climate change in Maltese

The Maltese language is not renowned for its ease of use to express scientific terminology and this has prevented many stalwart users of Maltese from venturing into writing about the scientific world. However, Immanuel Mifsud and Adrian Grima have had no such misgivings, and through their aptly-named publication Riħ Min-Nofsinhar (The south wind) they have managed to marry the two seemingly incompatible worlds of Maltese and climate change.

It is a collection of exquisitely balanced excerpts from various media and the witty prose on different aspects of complex climate change issues, ranging from sea level rise, impacts on agricultural yields, production of biofuels, warming of seas, desertification and environmental refugees, yet is a pleasure to read, avoiding pedantic, often unintelligible scientific jargon.