

## The start of squatter eviction



Some of the caravans at Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq are year-round entrenchments, complete with all sorts of amenities. Their eviction is long overdue.

Finally, this column's appeals to the government to start evicting squatters from public land are finally followed up. The government's Property Division (GPD) committee, spearheaded by the resolute Parliamentary Secretary Jason Azzo-pardi, has decided to bite the bullet and embark on the eviction of squatters from a number of sites, most notably the Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq caravan site.

Predictably, the aggrieved parties - the caravan owners, or better still, the squatters on public land - have cooked up all sorts of sob stories to try and gather sympathy. We heard arguments on the lines of "I am a pensioner and can't afford to rent a house in summer and the caravan at Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq is my only source of recreation."

Such arguments are reminiscent of those put forward by L-Aħrax and Ġnejna boathouse owners when faced with the prospects of eviction ("we don't do drugs" or "we don't go to Paceville").

It is increasingly apparent that once a violation on public land is committed, unequivocal action must be taken by the authorities within a few days since time is on the side of the perpetrators. In fact, part of the rationale behind the petition being organised by the Safari Camping Club is that their 'members' have been visiting the site for more than 20 years. Using the same logic, if I visit a site for a number of years, I can expect to be given some title over it, irrespective of its ownership or ecological importance.

Even more incriminating for the 'club' is their admission that they have sent an e-mail to the Prime Minister, asking why such a decision has been taken so suddenly. Would things be different had the same caravan owners been allotted seven days, instead of two, to leave the site?

This e-mail manoeuvre smacks of the most desperate of political lobbying - one only hopes that the momentum gained so far is not undermined in any way and that we actually get to see an unhindered coastline at Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq within the next few weeks. All local environmental organisations should realise that it's time to give Caesar his due and applaud such a brave step - only then can the government feel emboldened to take the right decisions.

Once cleared of squatters, the site should be restored to a semblance of its former condition, through removal of the concrete and marble surfacing and other similar 'amenities', and adequate landscaping.

Any alternative caravan sites identified should not impinge in any way on sites of ecological, landscape or agricultural value since the authorities would simply be transporting the caravan problem around the islands - it would be a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Only highly disturbed land should be earmarked, and caravan owners should be made to invest in the site and rehabilitate it prior to its temporary occupation.

The importation of further caravans should be curbed since, despite our aspirations of largesse, the islands' size simply cannot take any more caravan, camping and offroading sites, fireworks

factories and an array of other land-hungry 'pastimes'.

Are the I-Afrax boathouses next? Is this too tall an order?

## **Siggiewi council takes a stand**

Local councils are recently taking a more proactive stance on environmental issues. Siggiewi council recently made the headlines for threatening to bar access to heavy trucks through Triq Għar Lapsi on the way down to Għar Lapsi to the largest hardstone quarry on the islands, owned by the Polidano group.

Permits for the operation of quarries need to be renewed on an annual basis, subject to adherence to a number of conditions, stipulated by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority.

Last time round, the hardstone quarry in question was given the green light for the following year against a total of 26 imposed conditions. Specifically, condition 8 states that: 'A concrete or tarmacadam surfaced access road shall be provided for a distance of 75m from the public highway prior to the commencement of lorry movements out of the site. The surfacing shall be kept in a good state of repair and kept clean and free of mud, dust and other debris to the satisfaction of Mepa until the completion of site restoration.'

Condition 9 states: 'The applicant shall ensure that the public road leading to and departing from this site, inclusive of the stretch of road/country roads/footpaths immediately adjacent to the perimeter of the site, be kept clean and fully maintained at all times.'

In addition, the following proviso was appended to the granting of the permit renewal: 'permit is granted saving third party rights'.

The quarry, through its operations, constitutes a breach of numerous third party rights, not least of farmers' access to their land (now reduced to a hazardous pathway along the edge of the ridge), to motorists and to visitors to the site, who are regaled with moonscapes of dust-blanketed vegetation.

Inspecting some of the damage wrought to surrounding access roads by lorries and trucks laden with excavated material, the local council is certainly justified in taking such a stance - most often, conditions imposed on quarry operators are simply flouted.

Apparently, workers commissioned by Polidano did clear some of the debris from the roadsides a few days before the deadline set by the local council, but this amounts to a token gesture taken at the 11th hour, rather than a comprehensive clean-up operation. The local council should further expand its initiative to solicit the quarry operator to occasionally wash any dust settling on surrounding vegetation.

## **Tourism and the environment**

Tourism Parliamentary Secretary Mario de Marco certainly showed some acumen when calling for a closer link between tourism sectors and climate change awareness and that the tourism needed to take environmental issues into consideration.

These statements are in stark contrast to positions taken previously by local tourism authorities. Despite being long considered as a 'white industry', tourism is increasingly under the spotlight for its environmental impact. Dr de Marco is truly living up to the spirit of the 3rd International Conference on Sustainable Tourism, held in Malta at the beginning of September.

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