

Where is the sustainability?



The police claim that the makeshift driveway over pristine garigue at Mgiebah is quite long in the tooth - assuming this was true (which is certainly not the case, as documented at first hand by locals), does this preclude enforcement and legal action being taken on the premise that such acts should now be forgotten? This case is a recurring stain on MEPA's enforcement track record.

On a sweltering October Sunday afternoon, many Maltese flock to the beach for an off-season swim... a figment of the imagination? With 30°C temperatures last Sunday, a full month into autumn, all talk of a water-guzzling golf course should simply evaporate, but not in Malta, where tourism considerations reign supreme, even if rain is scarce and groundwater levels are at a low.

However, the voluminous environment impact assessment so proudly quoted by Angelo Xuereb in Protagonisti on Net TV certainly does not take global warming into the equation...

Although we had a couple of good downpours last Wednesday, these are only slight solace for the ever increasing periods of drought.

Hugh Arnett, writing in The Sunday Times Motoring magazine last week, claims that Mr Xuereb, unlike other property tycoons in this country, have been treated in a roughshod manner by NGOs, etc. I refer Mr Arnett to the blizzard of articles I wrote against other developers, including the big cheese he cared to mention.

The slew of regular contributors rallying in favour of golf courses in our islands would do well to study the various technical reports on golf courses that are currently available, including online ones, rather than firing statements from the hip.

I urge golfing advocates to come up with hard figures to substantiate their stance, as the anti-golfing lobby has consistently done. This morass of misinformation is fomented by the golf proponents themselves.

For example, the claim that birds will be protected by golf courses is the most short-sighted Green statement that I have ever heard, while another claim that golf courses are a safeguard against further urbanisation is nonsense, since we do not actually need to give a financial value to every parcel of natural habitat so as not to develop it.

A hike in electricity fees seems to be in the offing. This does not bode well for golf course proponents since about 17 per cent of our electricity production is used by reverse osmosis plants to desalinate seawater. So again I ask: where is the sustainability in the context of rising oil prices?

The Prime Minister claims that he has been advised by tourism experts that we actually need two more golf courses in our islands. Did he consult planning experts or is tourism the only concern we should have?

We already have the highest tourism density in the world - some 3,100 per square kilometre. We should rather be talking about how to reduce the number of tourists. The WWF Report on Tourism and Freshwater in the Mediterranean (available online at www.panda.org/mediterranean) states that on average tourists consume one-third more water than local residents, with luxury tourists consuming as much as 800 litres of water per day.

The country's mindset is so ossified that the MLP's representative on MEPA's board, Dr Joe Brincat, while voting against the Verdala golf course, said during the public hearing that he would be in favour of a golf course sited on non-agricultural land, such as at Ta' Qali. But this would mean depriving hundreds of Maltese families from enjoying one of the few remaining public spaces.

By this time, MEPA would have drafted its dreaded list of five recommended golf course sites and it is already rumoured that Pembroke is being considered for its vicinity to the 'Golden Mile' - and to the Pembroke reverse osmosis plant, I presume.

If, God forbid, the Pembroke site, which has already been rejected outright by MEPA (with no need for an EIA) is indeed shortlisted, then will anyone care to note during the ensuing furore

that this is actually a scheduled site due to the endemic orchid species present there and that even UNESCO at one stage intervened for its protection?

In an article in The Sunday Times last week, Fr Eugene Paul Teuma aptly expounds how we have long surpassed the ecological equilibrium in this country, as well as the carrying capacity of our tourism sector, as elucidated by Minister Francis Zammit Dimech himself.

And yet, we continue to bolster the number of beds in our tourism industry, despite falling occupancy rates. Despite increasing calls for the government to apply the brakes, it is endorsing the ribbon tourism development that is actually keeping discerning tourists away... who is burying one's head in the sand - the environmentalists or those in tourism?

And yet, we continue to pay lip service to the National Commission for Sustainable Development (NCSA), putting on a smokescreen endorsement of its future policies, whilst the two major political parties swear allegiance to the golf course lobby. We also continue to teach our children the meaning of 'sustainable development' in their syllabi, even though its meaning is still nebulous to us.

During a recent edition of Protagonisti (Net TV), after the programme I ended up trying to explain to the tourism tycoons present that we indeed had to conserve endemic plants and that yacht marinas and beach cleaning activities degrade Posidonia meadows and banquette communities.

Somebody even had the temerity to phone in on the programme (even claiming to be part of the University's academic staff) and vaguely suggesting that we should adopt a similar stance to that adopted in Sicily, with closely-knit wheelings and dealings, etc.

Such a situation could well have been avoided had the same tycoons had some thorough briefing on environmental tenets in their youth. This would have avoided their protestations to the competent ministers - "But why can't we build a hotel in Ramla, Gozo?" or "But why can't we have a yacht marina every five km of our coastline?"

Some relief might be found in the fact that our future hoteliers and tourism operators are being inculcated with a modicum of ecological rationale in credits being offered at University (Biology and Tourism) and by the MTA itself.

More preposterous planning cases

Mgiebah. I quote verbatim from the MEPA Website: "A direct action was carried out in August against illegal rooms and dumping on garigue without permit". Although no explicit reference was made to Mgiebah, all indications are that the reference is to it.

Despite all the vaunting by MEPA however, the developer (an ex-enforcement officer) seems to be able to outwit MEPA continuously since he duly erected a hide (dura) on the site.

Despite numerous attempts by conscientious locals, who even took pains to write directly to the police commissioner, the Prime Minister and the President, the public is still waiting for a de facto enforcement act by MEPA in ousting the squatter once and for all.

The police replied after several days, claiming that, from the way the rock was cut to make way for the passageway in the garigue, it could be concluded that it had been there for several years... anyone familiar with the site knows that this is not true.

Also, one cannot explain why no legal proceedings were taken against the perpetrator of such a rape, even though the identity of the person in question is well known.

Are some individuals indeed above the law? And then we brag that Malta is among the 25 least corrupt nations in the world (The Times, October 23)! Can the somnolent Lands Department dispel the widespread doubts over land ownership in the area since MEPA claims it is public while the same ex-enforcement officer claims it is his?

Thanking Raymond Sammut for the cue, the International Herald Tribune of September 20 carried an article, "Just rambling like a fox" regarding the first mass opening of private land to public access in decades in Millpond Bottom, England. By 2005, almost 4,000 square miles in Britain will have been opened to ramblers - the situation in Malta, as aptly depicted by the Mgiebah case, is very different.

Xemxija yacht marina. Minister Censu Galea gave vent to increasing speculation over the opening of a new yacht marina in Xemxija, although the area is endowed with dense Posidonia growths and is also a popular bathing spot, to meet growing demand for berthing space. A repeat of the Hondoq ir-Rummien saga appears to be looming on the horizon - the hunger to exploit our coastal resources appears to have no bounds.

Wied Lunzjata, Xlendi. This could well be one of the scheduled valleys in our islands, but this does not spare it the fusillade of ODZ applications that continuously rain upon it - yet another one to continue with the array shown last week is PA 07617/03, which also entails building over the existing belvedere and taking up an area earmarked for a street junction, leaving no access for disabled people or bicycles.

Sylvana Debono, MEPA's PRO, assures me that conflicts of interest are taken into account, specifically in terms of Section D of the Code of Ethics for Public Employees, but it is up to the

DCC whether the person involved in the application actually leaves the room or not during the decision-taking.

Potential conflicts of interest should be avoided by excluding practising architects from decision-taking boards, such as the DCC, something which I have been clamouring for ad nauseam.

Triq ir-Ramla, Nadur. Application no. 02407/04 refers to the construction of a cemetery in Triq Ghajn Qasab, Nadur. The picturesque credentials of Nadur often face the brunt of all kinds of development, with more rubble walls and carob trees facing the axe again. Are we at such a loss for degraded sites as to locate cemeteries and other 'amenities' away from pristine sites?

Salina - ministerial reply

Minister Censu Galea has lambasted Nature Trust for its stance regarding stormwater works being carried out by his ministry at Salina. I need not reiterate the plethora of local legislation protecting this sensitive site and the ministry's employees lack (surely an understatement) of environmental education.

Hence, in this context, the NGO's concern was understandable, especially since such works were not overseen by any monitoring body, such as MEPA's Environment Protectorate, even though heavy machinery was involved.

The minister's claim that "flooding was damaging the environment" certainly appeals to lay people but not to the discerning individual since Salina lies at the mouth of a floodplain and so the site is accustomed to occasional flooding. No degree of engineering works can 'mend' nature in any way, as the draining of Marsa and other former marshland sites teaches us.

Silver linings

Hats off to ST Microelectronics who have again shown the way in the environmental field by offering to spare some of their employees for a clean-up operation at Nature Trust's il-Ballut marshland reserve at Marsaxlokk this very Sunday morning.

Though long overdue, the non-hunting majority in this country certainly feel vindicated by the court's decision to impose a six-month jail sentence and a heavy fine on those involved in the infamous swan killings at St. Thomas Bay some years back.

For more hard facts on golf courses, I am more than willing to answer queries at: deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk