

It's simply beyond belief



This site in Żebbuġ was cleared of hundreds of mature trees to make way for a massive development – the only snag is that the developer allegedly had no permits in hand as yet.

It is simply incredible that in this day and age the indiscriminate uprooting of mature trees by developers still takes place. The recent uprooting of a number of such trees in a green urban pocket in Żebbuġ (Malta) between Triq is-Siġġiewi and Triq Ғal Mula to pave the way for a massive development comprising 159 garages, 137 apartments and 20 penthouses is a despicable act especially if, as alleged, the developer – GAP Holdings – had no permits in hand.

It is also hard to fathom how such a high-profile developer, which is responsible for major construction projects such as Fort Cambridge, failed to see the implications of its actions. Residents must understandably have been petrified to see bulldozers overnight literally making short shrift of the mature trees. One hopes that the evidence collected on site by residents and handed to the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and the police is acted upon.

GAP Holdings owner George Muscat's statement that his company "knew what it was doing and that it acted in accordance with the law" also defies belief. It comes as no surprise therefore that Mepa issued a stop and enforcement notice on site for the clearance of topsoil and site excavation without permit.

Even if GAP was not infringing the law, as Mr Muscat affirms, is he comfortable with the idea of proposing the development of hundreds of dwelling units in a country already plagued by 76,000 vacant units, and clearing the land of mature trees in the process?

The recently-launched Malta Developers Association (MDA) and the developers' section of the Malta Chamber of Small and Medium Enterprises (GRTU) should have been the first to denounce such a dastardly act, especially if the MDA still harbours any hope of revamping its public image and of lending credence to its pledge of opposing overdevelopment. So far, the silence from the MDA and the GRTU has been deafening.

Are we to assume that the MDA and the GRTU condone such actions by GAP Developments and that it considers that such massive development does not constitute overdevelopment?

Rather than public relations exercises such as interviews by MDA president Michael Falzon or crocodile tears for developers' sullied public image, it is such timely statements that would do the trick, along with black-listing any developers within its fold who commit such acts.

A lesson from the Aeolian Islands

The Aeolian Islands are a rarity – a Mediterranean archipelago which is as yet unscarred by the onslaught of ravenous development which has blighted so many other Mediterranean islands. The volcanic sette sorelle (seven sisters) are lapped by the Tyrrhenian Sea to the north of Sicily, from where they can be reached in just under one hour by hydrofoil.

The islands' mainstay is tourism, and this would lead one to assume that connections with Sicily and the Italian mainland are of paramount importance to the archipelago's inhabitants. In fact, the mayor of Lipari, the largest of the islands, has called for an airport to be developed as ferry connections are too infrequent and are axed when the sea is too choppy.

There are other hare-brained proposals, including the significant expansion of the port of Lipari and the extension of hotel developments on the island.

The mayor feels justified to clamour for an airport as ferry crossings to the island operate every three hours on average, with some of the more remote islands, such as tiny Alicudi and Filicudi, being even more isolated, with ferry crossings to these islands operating just twice or three times a day.

One cannot help but draw parallels with Gozo – where proponents for an airstrip have been flexing their muscles recently – where the next ferry crossing is at most just one hour away.

While Italian environmentalists, including high-profile former culture minister Giovanna Melandri and MP Ermete Realacci, honorary president of environmental group Legambiente, have successfully lobbied the Italian transport minister to scupper the airport proposal – which would also jeopardise the archipelago's status as a World Heritage site – Gozitan entrepreneurs and aviation aficionados keep toying with the idea, which jars with the eco-Gozo concept currently being touted.

Giuseppe la Greca, a left-wing council member in Lipari, sums it up well: "It (the airport) would disfigure the island. We would be destroying one of its most beautiful parts just so as to have a few charter flights during the high season."

If only those pushing for the Gozitan airstrip would see the light.

Sea urchins: The next gold rush?

Consumption of, and demand for the edible purple sea urchin (*Paracentrotus lividus*, rizza in Maltese) in the Mediterranean has reached such heights in recent times that the need for an international workshop to discuss the sustainable management of this coveted marine resource was felt. The workshop was held last October 8 and 9 in Palermo, Sicily.

Some presentations at the meeting intriguingly elaborated on the possibilities of a land-based echinoculture (the sea urchin aquaculture counterpart of fish-farms) to relieve the pressure on wild sea urchin populations.

The much sought-after sea urchin species is reputed to have a lifespan of nine years and reproduces once or twice a year. It is found at depths of up to 80 metres, preferring rocky reefs or vertical walls with crevices and seagrass meadows.

Maltese legislation (Legal Notice 311 of 2006) stipulates that the species' exploitation should be regulated, but there is very little monitoring and enforcement.

Sardinia's detailed management regulations for the edible sea urchin were also at the workshop. These include the limitation of sea urchin fishing to between November 1 and May 2, daily quotas of 1,500 specimens for professional fishermen, and 50 specimens for sport fishermen, limited fishing gear (only manual harvesting with knives is permitted), and restrictions on the minimum size of sea urchin that may be caught (50mm in diameter, without spines).

Interestingly, sea urchin populations within marine protected areas were normally lower than outside these protected areas, due to the protection of fish and starfish species, which keep sea urchin populations in check.

Coast Day 2010

Coast Day was commemorated internationally on October 2. As Malta is a quintessential maritime state, with over 270 km of coastline and almost 19 per cent of the its land surface area being described as coastal, one would have expected it to give more importance to commemorate this day.

The need for a coast day was felt in view of the sobering coastal-related statistics that are continuously released by authoritative entities such as the European Environment Agency and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

For instance, Plan Bleu (Blue Plan), which falls under the auspices of the Barcelona Convention and of UNEP's Mediterranean Action Plan, estimates that the population in the Mediterranean coastal regions grew from 95 million in 1970 to 143m in 2000, that is, 48m more inhabitants within 30 years, or an average annual growth rate of 1.4 per cent. By 2025, this population is expected to reach 174m inhabitants, that is 30m more inhabitants, or an annual growth rate of 0.8 per cent.

The number of cities with over 10,000 inhabitants located along the coast has practically doubled within half a century, from 318 in 1950 to 584 in 1995. By 2025, it is estimated that the population of coastal cities will reach 90 million, that is, 20m more city dwellers compared to 2000, or an annual increase rate of one per cent.

As tourism in the Mediterranean is mostly of a seaside nature it increases the pressures on the region's coasts, through the expansion of facilities and services. According to projections of national and international tourist visits, the coastal regions will be receiving 312m tourists in 2025, as against 175m in 2000, that is, an additional 137m tourists within 25 years.

In 2000, Mediterranean coastal areas heaved under the weight of 584 coastal cities, 750 yachting harbours, 286 commercial ports, 238 desalination plants, 180 thermal stations, 112 airports, 55 refineries, and 13 gas-producing facilities.

The production of molluscs, fish and shellfish increased from 149,000 tons in 1990 to 359,000 tons in 2001, that is, a 140 per cent increase in 12 years, or an annual growth rate of 8.3 per cent.

Due to urban sprawl, roads, tourist facilities, and ports, the concreting over of coastal land is expanding at an alarming pace: about 40 per cent of the coasts are now artificially covered. According to Blue Plan projections, by 2025, the artificial land cover of the coastal strip (up to 10 km inland from the coast) in Spain, Egypt and Lebanon will be close to saturation point.

www.alandeidun.eu