

Tourists and the environment - the MHRA survey



A construction just sanctioned by MEPA in the heart of Wied Qannotta (on the valley bed) behind Burmarrad. San Pawl Milqi chapel is seen in the background as the green buffer between Burmarrad and Bidnija is axed even thinner. Where has all our acumen about saving valleys gone?

As a society we have become more aware of prevailing trends. Hence, we resort more frequently to surveys to give us a snapshot of how we really are or a yardstick by which we can measure our behaviour.

Recently, the results of a MHRA survey carried out among 1,700 departing tourists between March and August were published. I am disappointed to see that, rather than acknowledging that the results of such a survey should worry us, some of us still manage to put on a brave face.

In particular, while the pride of most of us was still reeling from the fact that 53,000 of those interviewed said they would not recommend our island as a holiday destination and 137,000 said they would not consider visiting the islands again, the government media chose to be quite upbeat about the findings and their news bulletins headlined that only 14 per cent of the interviewed tourists considered the environmental situation in Malta to be bad overall.

My criticism of this reaction by the authorities is two-pronged. Firstly, 14 per cent is already a significant figure in itself, considering that most tourists coming on holiday to an island rarely venture far from the beach or from their hotel - you rarely go to an island resort for trekking.

Secondly, one would have expected some more thorough delving by those for whom such a survey was intended when it came to interpreting statistics. Twenty-six per cent of those who experienced excessive urban development felt it had a negative impact on their stay. So now it's official - after Prince Albert of Monaco's voice in the wilderness on over-urbanisation of our islands, a quarter of all tourists visiting our islands state that they are afflicted by this phenomenon.

Compare this 26 per cent with the six or seven per cent of Maltese who mentioned urbanisation as a major environmental problem in our islands earlier this year in a survey for The Sunday Times. This clearly shows our lack of awareness when it comes to environmental principles, focusing only on trivial issues such as cleanliness. Also, Germans, French, Dutch and Belgians are the most likely to complain about the environment, and the 25-44 age bracket are also most likely to have a negative response.

Bahrija San Martin fair - chance to witness the ongoing pillage

The annual San Martin fair at Bahrija is being held today. I was privileged to view a video recording of snippets of the annual fair held 30 years ago - the crowds and the street vendors with their bric-à-brac and the frenzy surrounding the winning of farm animals were already there, but there was visibly much less building development. The Sunday Times last week carried an advertisement for the sale of a villa in Bahrija for Lm250,000 - it has indeed become the land of the speculator.

Bahrija will inevitably end up as another Iklin - so now could be the time when it is still possible to see wanton destruction going on. Just pass by the roadside approach to the village, and observe the gaping craters in the ground due to bungalow/villa construction, or just take a walk down where the Count's quaint red palace used to tower unchallenged (opposite the church) to observe the carob trees cut down to make way for new age tasteless dwellings or, for the more enterprising, simply walk down to the garigue outside the village's perimeter to observe the concrete hunting hides or the barred access to caves in the cliffs below.

Just a small plea from my end - avoid collecting wild plants, such as wild thyme (saghtar) for cribs, etc. Every year, garigue areas around Bahrija are stripped and scarred of their most

attractive plants.

Bidnija and Wardija revisited

I have repeated the fact that small hamlets like Bidnija and Wardija are juicy targets for developers. Below are two Bidnija cases whose details were kindly supplied to me by MEPA staff and personnel, to whom I am grateful.

On July 14, 1999 a stop and enforcement notice (ECF 630/99) was issued regarding an illegal development in the middle of Wied Qannotta (just behind Burmarrad) consisting of extensions and alterations to an existing structure. A permit was issued on February 18, 2002 against the ludicrous payment of Lm112, although the construction still awaits sanctioning due to some modifications affecting the external appearance of the building. My gut feeling is that the developer will get away with a fully-fledged construction (minor modifications and not) right in the middle of a valley.

Even more galling is the photo referring to a hilltop eyesore construction within the limits of Wardija off Busewdien Road, in an Outside Development Zone, referred to by original building permit PA 7789/96. The site in question is also the subject of planning application PA 2747/01 which is currently at appeals against refusal. The developer in question applied for a gargantuan extension to his existing building, not being content with what he was originally granted.

One only hopes that the appeals board upholds the refusal handed down earlier on sound advice and comments bestowed by MEPA staff working on the case. Valid points they raised was that the area is a Rural Conservation Area of high landscape value, and that the need for the new development must be clearly explained and justified (which in this case was not).

Also, extensions to existing buildings must not create a total floorspace which exceeds 150 sq m (in this case, the total floorspace has been exceeded and by far, since it approaches 450 sq m - almost three times the permitted quota) and that the development has a negative visual impact, particularly its scale and massing, against the wider landscape setting of the site.

This crusade of mine is aimed at MEPA decision-making in general and not at the dedicated staff within its ranks who feel disconcerted at seeing so many of their recommendations being shunned when decisions are taken.

The catchphrase "Where is the famous MEPA?" is being used with great frequency by the disillusioned public, whose general perception is that policies governing MEPA actions are no longer valid today to safeguard against over-development, nor are the protracted and fruitless enforcement procedures against those flouting the law. What starts as illegal development becomes sanctioned development with time - being equipped with perseverance and a good architect well conversant with planning policies gets developers what they want.

Iklin Valley as a candidate for scheduling - valley networking

Julian Zarb (The Sunday Times, October 19) extols the work done by L-Iklin council over the past 10 years and gives a fleeting glimpse of times gone by (even though still in the recent past). Mr Zarb, in fact, states that in 1993 the upper part of Iklin had long been sought after as an upmarket hillside retreat.

So this is how the vicious circle of urbanisation starts - a pristine site being colonised by the few privileged who can afford to pay; this sets the precedent whereby all other 'commoners' also seek to own property in such a site and then rampant development sets in.

This is the story of how innocence within former natural areas around our islands is lost and nowadays we all know what 'Upper Iklin' has turned into, with sprawling bungalows claiming roadside verges of the valley, exacerbating flooding further downstream and depriving locals of a much needed green space.

This is the sad story of Wied Ghomor in Swieqi too (ironically, ghomor means longevity - this is unfortunate, considering the wholesale damage to this valley).

What's left of L-Iklin Valley should be scheduled, as has been done with the remnants of Wied Ghomor and a network of nature spots in urban areas should be set up to publicise the importance of these vital lungs or green spaces in the urban monopoly. Such natural remnants could also serve as beacons of our past and warn future generations of the perils of over-development.

Silver linings

In what can be regarded as a major breakthrough, European citizens are expected to be granted rights by the European Union to sue over environmental issues. New proposals will bring EU legislation in line with the 1998 Aarhus Convention by providing better access to environmental information and giving the public, including the Maltese, access to justice over environmental issues.

Members of the public can only challenge an act or an omission if they have a "sufficient interest" to do so, whereas NGOs can act even if they are not directly affected.

Yes, that forlorn Aarhus Convention, which has been so maligned, especially in countries like ours - in a nutshell, this convention gives citizens the right to free and unbarred information; a right which has been certainly shirked in the case of the planned Verdala golf course, for

example, with the late, overdue publication of the MRA (Malta Resources Authority) report on water resources (and only after the tenacious insistence of Anne Zammit) or every time that someone seeks to glean some land ownership information from our Lands Department.

Hundreds of illegal structures, mainly hunters' and trappers' hides, were removed from the public garigue at Pembroke last month, effectively ending the illegal stranglehold these squatters had on what had been defined as a level one site of scientific importance according to the Pembroke Action Plan of January 1996.

In addition, the Pembroke Policy Map of the North Harbour Local Plan of April 2000 called for the protection and upgrading of open spaces. I reiterate the word squatters since 60 per cent of the land in Pembroke is public - the enforcement action has been in the offing for the past four years!

Quotes of the month

"Beware," Professor Jeremy Boissevain warned us, "of the developers who, with a little help from their saints, would not hesitate to turn Malta into a Hong Kong of the Mediterranean" (Ranier Fsadni in his article Saints in a Network Society). Now here's some more consternation shown, after that by Prince Albert!

A radical white paper on the public service is proposing that the principle of "whistle-blowing" will be recognised as legitimate and that whistle-blowers should be protected from victimisation.

The prime minister claims that this white paper is a "public service for the 21st century". Hence, aspiring environmentalists should not be afraid to speak out since the importance of whistle-blowing is fast being recognised - will this principle ever extend to environmental issues too, traditionally one of the stigmas of Maltese society?