

Rising phenomena

ODZ parties



A recent Mepa enforcement action at Wardija was stopped dead in its tracks by a court order – this is becoming quite frequent.

There is obviously nothing amiss with holding in what in Maltese is known as a *hanżirata*, or a party with friends in a rural setting in which the meal is roasted pig.

Eyebrows do rise, however, when the organisation of such parties becomes semi-commercial and fuels the development of ancillary facilities in largely outside development zone (ODZ) areas.

For example, take the area of Mtarfa – the construction of a balustrade wall and a concrete platform, and the development of a wooden structure, stone pilasters, iron fence and the laying of concrete in at least two fields have been earmarked for Mepa enforcement action (ECF 994/01 and ECF 520/10).

What is even more mind-boggling is that the former enforcement notice dates back to 2001 – no wonder the organiser basked in a sense of impunity and forged ahead with flouting the law. In 2006 the organiser applied to sanction the room in question but his request was turned down by the Development Control Commission. Malta Environment and Planning Authority officials recently revisited the site and observed further contraventions, including the change of use for parties.

To make matters worse, one of the two fields in question is occasionally also used by a local clubbing/ partying enterprise – Pink Promotions – to hold its events. One cannot understand how such ventures are enticed by the secluded environs of such ODZ locations and do not do any background checks to verify if permits are in hand for the change of use of the premises.

The *raison d'être* of ODZ areas is that they should be used for agriculture or preserved for posterity, and not for cacophonous, light pollution-emitting events which fuel the development of the sites.

Injunctions

Mepa is arguably the most frequent butt of public vilification, and this is justified to some extent. However, one has to concede that very few, if any, news media actually carry stories on the hurdles constantly put in the way of Mepa enforcement.

The infringers' tactic of choice seems to be that of resorting to injunctions, whereby they file a request with the courts to immediately halt any enforcement action. The most recent glaring example was a brazen case at Ras il-Wied in Wardija, where Mepa officials moved in to demolish what supposedly were stables but which included facilities that made the place habitable, such as a bathroom, kitchen and shower.

For the record, Mepa enforcement encountered four similar obstacles last month alone. Cynics will probably dispel this as disproportionately strong action with the small fry, but it's actually these 'small fry' who are responsible for the vast majority of infringements in ODZ areas.

Offshore oil drilling

Offshore oil drilling in the Mediterranean is fast gaining traction, mainly as a result of the fallout from the Gulf of Mexico cataclysm, with yet another offshore area, besides the one close to Libya, being targeted for such a purpose.

Exploratory oil drilling has, in fact, started off the shores of the Italian island of Pantelleria. This area might be further from our shores than the oil well in the Gulf of Sirte, which is just 515 kilometres south of Malta, but it still could spell disaster for the central Mediterranean.

Exploratory oil drilling is also set to start off Sicily's west coast, with Italy granting a total of 21 permits for such drilling in its territorial waters.

As a kneejerk reaction to the Gulf of Mexico calamity, the US was quick to impose a moratorium on further deep-water drilling in the gulf. The European Commission is still toying with a similar initiative but in the meantime, the Mediterranean seems to be bearing the brunt of the relocation of deep-sea exploratory drilling from the Gulf of Mexico.

An aberrant eco-Gozo view

Many have expressed their tuppence worth over the eco-Gozo philosophy and it has been an incestuous meshing of the sacred and the profane so far.

One such contribution was penned by Raymond Xerri in a past issue of the Gozo Observer. In the article he makes many commendable and almost sacrosanct pro-proposals, including the removal of alien floral species, the setting up of public parks, further afforestation schemes, the development of a solar tower and the reconstruction of rubble walls. But he also makes some proposals which are, frankly, preposterous.

His vision for eco-Gozo, envisages a yacht marina at Hondoq ir-Rummien in Qala, a regional airport at Xewkija and two artificial islands off Gozo's northern coastline.

How Xerri manages to put the last three proposals in the same kettle as eco-Gozo beats me, although one must mention that he is the only local councillor in Qala to be in favour of the Qala Creek development proposal.

End of the line

According to the Chinese calendar, this is the Year of the Tiger – however, the fizz has long gone flat, especially considering that the global population of wild tigers stands at just 3,200, fuelling fears that tigers will have gone extinct by the next Year of the Tiger in 2022.

St Petersburg will host the Tiger Summit from November 19 to 24. The event will bring together the 13 nations currently hosting wild tiger populations in an attempt to weave a path to the continued existence of this graceful species.

So far, three tiger sub-species –the Caspian, Bali and Java in Indonesia – have become extinct in the 20th century, while the omen for the South China tiger are not looking good.

Five dwindling tiger sub-species still remain, with tiger numbers going down by as much as 93 per cent since 1975, when the international trade in tigers and their body parts (the main culprit behind their demise) was first banned under the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species.

The BBC recently documented the existence of a high-altitude (at about 4,000 m – way above the tree line) tiger population in Bhutan, testifying how tigers are being pushed beyond their natural range and further into inhospitable terrain by expanding human settlements and poaching.