

Shifting goalposts at Portomaso



An entrenchment wall dating back to the Knights, is set to be completely engulfed in between two apartment blocks if the latest proposed extension to Portomaso is granted.

PA04096/08 is not your run-of-the-mill planning application. It was submitted by the Portomaso magnates to further extend their real estate on what should be a protected ecological zone.

In 1996, amid the furore caused by the original permit, the developers had put up prominent fences with a notice saying that the coastal stretch which is now in their sights was being temporarily cordoned off on Mepa's advice to safeguard its important ecological status.

The notice read: 'As part of the Hilton site redevelopment project, the site within this wall is being sealed off for the protection of important ecological species during project construction and will be reopened to the public...'

What they conveniently failed to mention was that the site would be reopened to the public only on a temporary 13-year emphyteusis, after which they would seek to develop it.

In fact, the site had been found to harbour two plant species of conservation importance - the wedgefoot grass (at the time, known to exist only at one other location in Malta) and the endemic Maltese sea-chamomile. Incidentally, the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) document for this development has been misplaced and cannot be found.

Another provision of the original permit was for the developers to preserve public access from Spinola Road to the yacht marina - this will be jeopardised as public access to the coastline will be more convoluted, through a winding flight of steps.

Now, 13 years later, it transpires that the same developers have gone back on their pledge to conserve the coastal stretch in question and have earmarked part of this zone for the construction of 60 apartments, a car park, a swimming pool and a roof garden. The goalposts have shifted at Portomaso, with an area originally identified as having conservation value in the Structure Plan being subsequently rezoned for development in the North Harbours Local Plan.

One of the reasons for such a reclassification might have been that the two species in question have disappeared from the site. If this is the case, an independent ecological survey should assess this and, if confirmed, the developers should be held responsible for such a loss, since the EIA had stipulated they had to ensure the conservation of the two species.

Another provision in the EIA, which the developers have breached, was that the entrenchment wall dating from the time of the Knights should be preserved. If the current application is given the green light, the wall will be sandwiched between two blocks of apartments, rendering it almost useless.

In 1995-96, permission was granted to demolish part of the wall in order to provide access to the yacht marina; if the wall ends up marooned between two apartment blocks, this will further undermine its relevance.

ELC's blinkered approach to alien species

Environment for Europeans, the magazine of the Directorate-General for the Environment of the European Commission, featured an article which exposes the misguided approach taken by some people involved in environmental 'embellishment'.

The article, entitled 'Island invader sent packing', recounts how conservation efforts on the island of Minorca had finally managed to eradicate the ground-creeping ice plant, or hottentot fig, from most of the island, thanks to a concerted campaign co-funded by the EU Life programme to oust the invader.

While Minorcans have rightly embarked on eradicating alien species from their country, the embellishment consortium ELC, which is entrusted with giving a facelift to our roundabouts among other duties, regularly and wilfully introduces invasive species to our shores. The airport roundabouts, for instance, are carpeted with the rapidly-spreading species. It has also been introduced to the central strips over Manwel Dimech Bridge.

The United Nations has declared 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity, to acknowledge the daunting biological challenges being faced worldwide. One of the most insidious challenges is, in fact, posed by the introduction of non-indigenous species, and Malta has already borne the brunt of some notorious alien introductions such as those of the cape sorrel (*Haxixa Ingliza*) and the red palm weevil.

It is a pity the ELC has not yet woken up to this reality.

Fisheries' portfolio loss to Malta

Without delving into political judgments, I must say the loss of Joe Borg from Fisheries Commissioner is a dire one indeed, which will probably have ramifications over the years.

The loss of the fisheries portfolio, so relevant to a maritime country like Malta, is especially significant, more so since Borg approached his portfolio in a prudent way.

He actively campaigned for an Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP) in view of the fact that Europe is bordered by four regional seas and two oceans, which account for 40 per cent of Europe's GDP and provides employment for five million Europeans.

Another issue he was promoting was marine spatial planning, which seeks a more logical designation and utilisation of marine area in order to minimise conflicts between end-users.

One can only augur that Maria Damanaki, the new Maritime and Fisheries Commissioner who hails from Greece, will have the same foresight as Borg in promulgating a pan-European strategy towards holistic management of the seas. This is well and truly in the interest of Malta, which still lags behind in the implementation of IMP strategies, despite having a marine area that is a whopping 40 times our terrestrial area when taking our 25-nautical mile Fisheries Management Zone into consideration.

Mepa website offers easier data access

The launch of the revamped Mepa website has made it easier to gain access to the list of planning applications referring to ODZ sites, making their regular monitoring much easier. The website facelift has also resulted in reconsiderations being listed in a systematic fashion.

This welcome development strengthens the legacy of the e-applications initiative taken some time ago. One augurs that such initiatives will increase the number of objections filed against development applications, which are still very low compared with the number of applications filed.

Hopefully, the same website will feature all approved EIAs and information relative to Natura 2000 and other protected sites.

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